SHADOW UNIT

Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear, Sarah Monette, Will Shetterly, Leah Bobet & Holly Black.

Season 2

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Credits

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content that does not transfer to epub (such as website formatting).

Hafidha Gates' LiveJournal, Jun. 11th, 2008

My, I'll bet you monsters lead interesting lives.

Hey, Platypus?

The notaboy wants to know if he can come visit.

I could bring him by tonight if you're up for company.

- Current Mood: cheerful
- Current Music:Meredith Brooks - Watched You Fall

shadow unit

2.01 "Lucky Day" - by Elizabeth Bear & Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Washington, D.C., June 24, 2008

Gray Putnam was reaching for his door handle when the semi went past, rocking his Audi on its shoes and drowning the driver's side in a wall of water. He watched taillights vanish behind a curtain of rain and twilight, and thought *Maybe I'll just slide over and get out on the passenger side.*

But another truck roared through in the slow lane, and the Audi wallowed like a sailboat in a trough. Gray looked down at the drained cellphone plugged into the dead dashboard and cursed. So much for Triple A.

"Piece of shit," he said to the Audi conversationally, and thumped one hand on the steering wheel.

He was just trying to figure out the best way to get his knees past the shifter when something large pulled up behind him, a glare of headlights and blue and red flashers running behind the grill all he could see in the rear window, through the rain.

Thank you, Jesus, Gray thought, as a big dark shape swung down out of the tall vehicle--did cops drive pickup trucks now?--and crossed behind the Audi to approach on the passenger side. His rescuer, a powerfully-built man in a dark suit--Gray caught a glimpse of a blue shirt getting soaked and a black leather belt snugged around a trim waist--paused by the Audi's center pillar on the passenger side and leaned down to rap on the window. Off-duty, then, and just playing the good Samaritan?

Gray hit the button to roll the glass down and cursed. Of course the electric windows didn't work. He leaned over and indicated with gestures that he was going to open the passenger door a little. The cop waved permission,

displaying blunt hands with neat fingernails. *Don't cruise the Rescue Ranger, Gray.*

He cracked the door. Rain spattered the leather seats, but Gray didn't care. "Boy, officer," he said. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you. I think it's the alternator. My whole electrical system just died, and my phone isn't charged."

Even in the watery glare of headlights, the face that appeared under the top edge of the frame when his rescuer ducked down just about made him stammer like a kid. The cop was *gorgeous*. Thick hair--plastered-wet and indeterminate in color now--dripped down over a classic nose, stuck to cheekbones right out of a cowboy movie poster. Gray's mouth went dry; his palms squeezed tight on the steering wheel.

"I'm not a cop," the cop said. "Okay, not that kind of cop. Aw, *shit*--!"

Another big truck, and an arc of filthy water slammed into the Audi and, incidentally, drenched the guy crouched by the open passenger door. "Bleh," he said, shaking his hands like a tiger flicking dew off its paws. He looked up at the sky in disgust. "Fuck me sideways."

"Oh, Jesus," Gray said. "I'm sorry--"

The not-a-cop laughed. "Well, *you* weren't driving the truck. Look, I'm Danny. Brady." His expression dared Gray to say something about it. "You want a ride?"

"Gray," Gray said. "Gray Putnam. And oh, brother, do I."

Was that a flirting eyebrow in response? Too much to hope for, maybe, but Danny's gaze was lingering. And not just on his face.

Gray extended his hand, meaning to shake, but somehow Danny got ahold of his wrist in callused fingers and slid him out of the car effortlessly, so he was on his feet in the rain before he knew it. *Strong*, he thought, and felt an answering kick in his belly.

"Grab your stuff," Danny said. "Let's get out of here before we attract another fleet of trucks." And then, as if he'd only just realized he was still holding on to Gray's wrist, he let go like it was hot, cleared his throat, and looked down.

Gray grabbed his keys, wallet, and the dead cellphone and charger. As he was shutting the Audi's door and locking it, he patted the automobile surreptitiously on the roof. Maybe he owed the car one, after all.

*

Falkner's work phone only managed the first three notes of "Viva Las Vegas" before her hand wrapped it. She quelled a shock of adrenaline--worry, excitement, relief--and pressed the phone to her ear. "Chaz? What are you doing up?"

His laugh sounded tired, which hurt but did not surprise her. "I'm not up, exactly. What are you doing up?"

Falkner sat back in her chair, surveying a kitchen table awash in sheets of newspaper, white glue, and flour paste. Across the surface, her younger daughter peered up at her through a banner of glossy hair and waved. "Helping Deborah with a papier-mâché project. She says hello."

"Tell her I said hi. Look, I had a--sort of an insight into one of Reyes's pet projects."

Falkner didn't like the bright, brittle tone, but she knew better than to let him hear her unease. Part of effective leadership was the appearance of calm, the ability to wrap your subordinates in the sense of being needed and safe.

"Tell me whose arm I should break for bringing you work," she said, and kept it dryly humorous. Deborah, recognizing the underlying tone, suddenly found a need to slide out of her chair and wander towards the bathroom. "Wash the paste off your hands before you touch the towels!" Falkner called after her.

In her ear, Chaz chuckled. She heard the bedcovers rustle. He wouldn't be shrugging, not without wincing.

The wince was in his voice when he answered, "The work was already in my head. I mean, I had all the pieces. I maybe just needed a little down time to work it out in."

"You're supposed to be resting, Chaz."

He laughed again. "I was resting! I dreamed it! Look, remember the cluster of deaths by misadventure that Reyes has had us dogging all over the f-- the Southwest? Weird, completely random stuff. A woman killed when the glass

in her kitchen door shattered and sliced her carotid artery. A guy who literally--*literally*--slid on a banana peel and fell under a bus. And Hafs and I have been saying it was nothing, there's no connection, his hunch is a dud. They're just accidental deaths. Right?"

"I'm hanging up the phone now, Chaz. Go to sleep."

"Falkner, wait. *Wait.* I think we were wrong. A statistically significant fraction of the most suspicious-looking non-suspicious deaths--the really freakish freak accidents, the ones that are just weird enough for Final Destination part twenty, whatever, have a consistent victimology."

"All right," Falkner said. "I'm listening."

"They're all *assholes*, Falkner. They're the sort of people where, when you hear something terrible has happened to them, you kind of shake your head and think well, he had it coming. The kind of people you really wouldn't mind seeing fall under a bus."

"Nobody deserves to fall under a bus--" She was, she knew, speaking for her own outrage and wrath.

And she also knew Chaz was going to call her on it, so she grinned when he did: "Falkner. Stop it with the reaction formation for a minute and listen to me. You don't have to Mom my aggressive impulses into more socially acceptable forms."

"It was sublimation," she said. "Not reaction formation."

"Of course. Your defense mechanisms are sublimely healthy. But here's what I was saying. It was almost impossible to pick out because there's so much background noise, but the really weird deaths that fit that victimology all happened in clusters."

"Geographic clusters?"

"Clusters in *time*." He was tiring already. She could tell by the sound of his breathing, which rasped across the cell pickup. "There'll be a cluster of five or ten, all within two or three months, each cluster eight months to two years apart. Here's where the geographic profiling comes in, though--if you apply it to those particular deaths as clusters they suggest a progression--a route--within that time, though the route isn't the same from one time-cluster to the next."

"Salesman," she said. "Trucker."

"Drug distributor," he suggested. "Senior citizen with an RV. Do I have permission to generate the profiles and email you?"

She was pressing the cell too tight to the side of her face. She could feel the sweat puddling between the plastic and her skin. "No hauling bricks," she said.

"Only in my sleep," he answered. "Call me if you need me."

He cut the connection, leaving her leaning on the hand that cupped around her phone.

*

Solomon Todd ground his fingers into the inside corners of his eyes. *As if I could dig out the tired*, he thought.

He stretched his spine against the padded back of a chair rolled up to the briefing room table. A good, relaxing sensation--just enough to remind him of his underused bed in Bethesda, and how nice it would be to crawl into it and stop taking money from the taxpayers. He could go back to journalism. It had been long enough that the people he'd pissed off now admired him for it. And he'd bet Cokie Roberts had been photogenically snoring since ten p.m.

Who are you kidding? If you weren't in a briefing room in the Hoover Building, you'd find someplace less comfortable to lose sleep in.

Reyes, in his designated chair, looked every bit as rested as he had since Texas, which was not at all. His dark skin had the ashy, drawn look Todd had seen on people who'd been at the front lines of disaster a little too long. "Who are we missing?" he asked.

The moment of twitchy silence, Todd decided, was inevitable.

"Hafs will be here in a minute," Daphne Worth said. Her voice was crunchy and pitched lower than normal, and she clutched her coffee cup like Leo DiCaprio clinging to Kate Winslet. "She's printing out Chaz's stats."

"What?" Nikki Lau looked up from the open file box in front of her and scowled; her strong, small hands clenched the cardboard on both sides. "Who's been letting Chaz get statty?"

"I wouldn't say 'let.'" Falkner stepped into the room, then sideways along the wall as if following a guide wire under the carpet. She was flawlessly crisp, but her pale skin made a nice contrast to the shadows under her eyes.

Good thing we're all looking and feeling our best.

Worth shrugged at Lau. "It's not like we can say, 'Chaz, stop *thinking*.'"

Quick footsteps beyond the door pushed the conversational pause button. But it was Daniel Brady, and the held-breath sensation lasted only an instant.

Speaking of the climax of Titanic*,* Todd thought. Brady's hair was darkened to near-brown and flattened to his scalp, his shirt soaked at the collar and down the front where his jacket hadn't covered it. Todd hated to think what the jacket looked like.

Brady, with every reason to be irritable as a cat in bath water, smiled at the room. "Evening, all." He tugged out a chair 'til it bumped the wall and settled into it.

"You were kidnapped and thrown in the Potomac," Lau offered, her eyebrows trying to make contact with her hairline.

"It's coming down like a pissing mare. Maybe you noticed?"

"Aaand...that made you want to stand under a downspout?" asked Worth.

Lau made a noise like an air-filled balloon leaking.

Brady rolled his eyes. "Stopped to help a stranded driver."

"Ah." Todd nodded. "Which involved deep-water rescue. Damn those freeway culverts."

"Don't any of you quit your day jobs," Brady said, but mildly.

Hafidha Gates swept into the room. She wore a staggering verdigris-colored short dress under a black coat--*No, rewrite for vivid and accurate*--under the red-headed stepchild of tails and an eighteenth-century highwayman's greatcoat, in black. Her braids were joined at the ends with a daisy chain of beads, and her eyes were an unlikely grass-green. She must have been clubbing when Falkner's call reached her.

Hafidha dropped her sheaf of paper on the table in front of Brady. "Take one down and pass it around. Nikki, sweetie, you pull the case jackets?"

"Right here." Lau tugged folders out of the file box and made five stacks of them in the middle of the table. "Five ranges of dates, forty-two deaths ruled accidental. Chaz tagged all of these?"

"Just the ranges of dates," Falkner corrected. "Some of these cases will fall off the list when we look hard at them. We'll start with geography and victimology."

Brady dealt Hafidha's printouts to the team. Todd studied his copies. A list of accidental deaths, grouped by dates and locations. And an annotated map of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah.

They'd plotted these cases by location before, trying to spot clusters, proximity to a single area, common industries, shared past trauma. Now connect-the-dots constellations overlaid the map. Possible routes, five of them, each a different color. 2007 in red. 2005-2006 in green. 2004 in yellow. 2003 in blue. 2001 in Pepto-Bismol pink. They crossed, overlapped, diverged, like the work of a spider on acid.

He looked up from the printouts to the five piles of case jackets and sighed. "I never grudge the Bureau my time and attention. But can't you just bring these up on your monitor and look for pretty colors?"

Hafidha rolled out the chair next to Todd, slid into it, and patted his arm. "Duke, you know I wouldn't make you slave over a hot desk if you didn't have to. The files don't go Technicolor. They're accidents."

"Except Chaz says that's statistically unlikely."

Reyes leaned forward. "Or it's statistically likely they're murders. I know I've been driving you crazy with these cases for months. But Chaz may have given us a way into them." He pulled a folder toward him off the nearest pile. "Let's squeeze these bastards 'til they yell."

They each snagged a case jacket. Todd suspected they all heard what he had, the unspoken statement: *Chaz used up a little more of his time for this. Let's not waste it.*

Two hours later, they had a preliminary sort of twenty-seven cases and a wheels-up time of five a.m.

"Wow." Lau slumped in her chair and sighed. "Twenty-seven thoroughly unpleasant people dead by accident."

"But given the geographic spread and total lack of anything else the victims had in common..." Worth trailed off and looked around the table.

"...it doesn't seem possible that this can be a personal vendetta," Reyes finished for her. "You're right."

Brady tilted his head. "But we won't rule it out."

"They really don't want to hear about this one Down the Hall," said Falkner.

That pried half a smile out of Reyes. "This is going to be about legwork and data-sifting. Hafidha, Worth, Todd, and I will head out and work the scenes."

"And we'll shuffle paperwork," Falkner finished. She stretched where she stood. As if it were a signal, most of the team gathered notes, files, and belongings and straggled out of the room.

Lau restacked folders with elaborate care. Brady paused beside the door, watching the others into the bullpen and waiting for Todd and Lau. He turned, eyed Lau's bent head, raised his eyebrows at Todd. Todd shrugged. If Lau was waiting for one or the other of them, she'd have to speak up about it.

"Bring back some salsa," Brady said, and stepped into the hall. Lau didn't call him back.

Todd tucked his papers under his arm. *Or maybe she just wants to be alone*. "Ah, well, time enough for sleeping in the grave."

"Duke." She said it like a cough.

He laid the files back on the table, lined them up with the edge. No hurry. By the time he was done, she could straighten her shoulders and meet his eyes. A lock of shining dark hair swung forward over one cheekbone; she poked it behind her ear.

"Is Chaz going to make it?"

If he'd listed things Lau might want to ask him in private, that wouldn't have been near the top. "Nikki-- Dr. McCoy's line from *Star Trek*? The opposite of that."

It got him something that was almost a smile. "'I'm a spook, not a doctor?'"

He drew himself up very straight, which was what it took to look down his nose at her from a sufficient height. "I beg your pardon. I'm a law enforcement professional and an employee of the Justice Department. Spook, indeed."

She laughed, but barely, and looked away. "I just wondered if someone...if you'd heard something I might not have." Her copy of the printout, of Chaz's geographic profile, topped the pile of folders on the table in front of her. She rubbed her thumb slowly along the bottom edge, as if smoothing a non-existent crease.

Todd considered for a moment sitting down again. No, too much gravitas. This might, indeed, be the part of the narrative for it, but he was just superstitious enough that he didn't want to invite it in. He hitched one hip onto the table instead and braced his palms on his knee.

Once upon a time, he thought wryly. "My Uncle Phil once had a horse that wouldn't stay in the pasture. Every other horse in the barn would be in there with him, but he'd jump the fence and keep running 'til he wore himself out. As far as anyone could tell, he jumped the fence because he *could*."

Lau raised her head when the pause stretched and it was clear he wasn't going to break it. "Okay, I live out by the airport. That one went right over my head."

"You can't keep Chaz from doing what he does. Even if he's doing it for us."

A graceless jerk of her shoulders and head, so odd in a woman who made grace part of her professional discipline. "It's going to *kill* him."

Todd nodded and picked up his files. "That's what kills us all. Doing what we do."

Act II

The past Christmas, Daphne Worth's friend Chaz Villette had gone to Hawaii on vacation, and come back with several things. One was a suntan the color of a Hershey bar. Another was a gift for her, the kind of inexpensive, observant present that was far more to be treasured than anything costly and common.

It was a carved obsidian pendant, a woman's face embraced by the crescent moon, beautiful and serene. It had probably told her more than he intended, but it had also made it plain that he'd noted some things she was inclined to keep private these days, like her adopted religion and what in it she identified with.

So when they'd brought Chaz back from Texas, unconscious and flat and crumpled as a sheet, she'd put that pendant on a chain long enough that it dropped into the plunge of her bra and hung it around her neck. It lay there, invisible under her collar, because mindfulness is how the brain changes things, and ritual is a way to reinforce mindfulness.

She'd never say *as long as I wear this he can't die.* But every time the pendant bumped her breastbone, she remembered for a moment, and focused on his recovery. On Chaz strong enough to stand up, walk across the room, hug her back.

It fell from her shirt when she bent forward to tuck her go bag into the Gulfstream's locker. She touched it, for a moment, slid her thumb over the warm, slightly oily surface.

He was going to be okay.

*

The plane was a sort of cocoon, Reyes thought, watching his worn-edged and much-abbreviated team hunch in their seats, heaps of case jackets piled around them as they studied like kids at a cram party.

"Gah," Worth said, pushing her bangs out of her eyes with a forearm that popped cables of climber's muscle when she curled her fingers. "Where do we even start with this?"

Reyes sucked on his lower lip for a minute before he answered. It tasted like cold tea and stale pastry. The flavor of the job. "We work each one like an individual murder case."

"Gnaw through it until we get to the delicious creamy center," Todd said. He glanced up from a jacket, frowning. "You weren't kidding about the footwork. Known associates, known enemies, immediate family, business partners, illicit love affairs. Interviews. Lots and lots of interviews. Congratulations: we're a cold case team."

Worth folded one file closed and snaked over another. "Interviews. I wish we had Brady."

"And Es," Hafidha said. Her laptop perched on the table before her, open but untouched, turned so the rest of the team could watch data pile itself into spreadsheets and onto map displays as fast as her eyes could scan paper.

Nobody looked at Reyes. It wasn't anything so formal as a protest of his command decision. Just a little--you couldn't even really call it passive-aggressive, because there wasn't that much hostility behind it--good-natured complaint.

He was the one who'd picked the away team, and he had his reasons. They were still fragile, some of them more than others. Worth and Hafidha might be closest to Chaz, but they were also coping better than Brady or Lau, and Falkner needed to be where the people showing cracks were.

"And Lau," Reyes said, just to let them know he heard them. "I wish we didn't need them back at the office. But we'll manage."

Todd was the rock upon which Reyes had built his church. Such as it was. He ran a finger down a printed page, and grunted. "Somehow we always do. Just pile the paperwork on until I creak."

Reyes watched Worth and Gates pretend not to notice. "What's the first town on our touring schedule, Hafidha?"

"Albuquerque proper," she said. "Chaz'd give you a better answer, probably. But four out of five of our circuits match up there. And there's an outlier, a freaky death with no close calendrical associates to others, and Albuquerque is the only place that happens where there are also associated ones. So maybe it's not associated, and maybe it's associated and it can serve as the statistical outlier that helps crack the code. Did that paragraph make any sense?"

Todd winced.

Worth hid a smile behind a jacket. She said, "Who the hell decided to name it Albuquerque? What kind of a name is that?"

Reyes wanted to drop his gaze, but he made himself keep his chin up. If Chaz were there, he would have an answer, detailed and accurate. If Chaz

were there, the case files would already be collating in the back of his head, soon to be digested and regurgitated in new and more useful forms.

Hafidha breathed out through her nose to break the silence, as if she needed an entrée before she could continue. "I figure if we don't get a bingo there, we can start picking through smaller communities. Las Cruces has three hits, and it's about a sixth the size of Albuquerque. Smaller subject pool."

"With any luck, we won't need to work all twenty-seven," Worth said. "It's always in the last place you look, because that's where you stop looking."

"Twenty-seven cold cases," Todd said. He turned his head to stare out the window as the plane banked, beginning its approach. Reyes knew what he saw out there--black-green spills of piñon pine and juniper down the mountain valleys, wheat-brown earth, red tile roofs, a wealth of trees tinting the residential sections verdigris, like the dress Hafidha had changed out of. "Even if we don't have to work them all, I wonder how many interviews that's going to wind up being?"

"Complaint noted," Reyes said, and handed him another file.

*

Since they were here on their own interstate jurisdiction rather than working a single particular local case, there was no inviting agency. Daphne was not surprised that no liaison officer met them on the tarmac. When Reyes excused himself to see about a rental vehicle to get them as far as the field office on Luecking Park Avenue, Daphne, panting in the desert heat, pulled the other two inside the air-conditioned terminal.

"Why does this look so familiar?" Hafidha asked, shrugging her go bag higher on her shoulder and gawking ostentatiously at the interior architecture. Albuquerque was one of the better airports for looking at, Daphne thought, with an art-gallery air reinforced by Southwestern colors and museum displays of tribal artifacts. "Ohmi*god*, it's déjà vu!"

Daphne sighed and tugged her sideways by one black-and-white-checked sleeve, just before she walked into an exec-type with a rolling bag and a cell phone. "Don't squash the pedestrians, girlfriend."

"Oh, wait. It looks familiar because I've been here *three frikkin' times* in the past year. Tell me we're going to find a killer this time? Because if I have to

come back here again, I'm just buying real estate."

Todd caught up with them, thumbing his phone off. "New Mexico, Land of Enchantment."

"Land of House Trailers, more like. Georgia O'Keefe wouldn't recognize the place."

"There are some perfectly acceptable trailer parks out there."

"Oh, honey, you haven't seen. Around here they don't put them in parks. They just pick half an acre of scrub and drop a trailer on it. It's like a free-range chicken laying eggs."

Daphne considered Hafidha's canted eyebrows. "Hon, do you need a sandwich?"

"God, I thought you'd never ask."

"Wouldn't you rather have green chile enchiladas at Garcia's?" Todd looked hopeful as a beagle eyeing a biscuit.

"No, I'd rather have a sandwich now and enchiladas afterward."

Todd patted her arm. "Silly me. Of course you would. Airport food, here we come."

"Bah," Hafidha said. "It's not an airport. It's a 'Sunport.' Can't you read the signs?"

"Food court this way," Daphne said, and pulled her partners along.

*

The street was edged on both sides with old cottonwoods that PNM or the phone company or both had eviscerated to pass their wires through. Hafidha figured it for a good blue-collar neighborhood just before World War II. Now the little square houses came with cracked, stained stucco, rusty swamp coolers, angry dogs, angrier kids, and straggling shrubbery, and graffiti tagged the swaybacked one-car garages.

"I take it," Reyes said from the driver's seat, with no discernible emotion, "Monica Little didn't benefit financially from her brother's death."

Hafidha bolted the last of a bag of potato chips and wiped her fingers on a fast-food napkin. They'd traded the rental car for a pair of Bureau all-terrain

gas guzzlers and split up with their interview lists. *Well, the elbow room doesn't suck.* "Maybe she's just keepin' it real. Not that I have any idea why lousy neighborhoods have more reality than nice ones."

"This was a nice one, once."

"Well, according to Zillow and a few other helpful sources, average assessed home value within four blocks is seventy-nine thousand, which is crap even for Albuquerque. Sixty-two percent of the properties are rentals. Average per-household income is eighteen thousand a year."

Reyes shot her a look, away from the windshield. "You can live on that in Albuquerque?"

"Let me finish, captain my captain. And sixty-five percent of households are on some form of state or federal assistance."

"Hard times, come again no more," Reyes muttered. "And may I ask how FBI teams that don't include you get anything done?"

"They stumble around in the dark and luck out now and then." Hafidha knew her own value. But Reyes was stingy with that kind of sweeping praise. If she accused him of trying to soften her up, would he be proud of her for following in his twisty footsteps? "Got a script you want to play here?"

Reyes pulled the SUV to the curb in front of a house with a topped pine shading the front door and a sun-scorched Chevy Lumina in the carport. "I don't think so. Little is Leroy Valejo's closest surviving relative. She may be able to tell us who he knew, and who knew him. Let's just cast as wide a net as possible and see what swims in."

Monica Little would have been called "stout" in a previous age. The part in her graying black hair sat level with Hafidha's chin, but she probably weighed double what Hafidha did. Not that that was the best metric. But Little was built like a woman designed for a solid connection with the ground.

She worked for a lawn care service, and had the ruddy brown skin, crows' feet, and broken-nailed hands to prove it. She wore Wal-Mart jeans and a clean navy blue t-shirt sporting the words "Indian Country," printed so the letters seemed to be windows onto a view of an American flag. Her cramped living room was a welter of partly-folded laundry, last week's newspaper,

and half-finished craft projects. A ceramic plaque of the Virgin of Guadelupe hung over a tiny shelf near the door. The shelf held a lit votive candle. Hafidha wondered if the only thing that kept it from also holding car keys and yesterday's mail was that it was too small. The swamp cooler had the indoor temp down to maybe eighty.

"My brother wasn't the kind of guy they call the FBI on," Little said, once she'd waved them to the dining table at the end of the room and cleared a pile of magazines off a chair so they could all sit.

Reyes tilted his head. "He was a good man?"

She laughed, loud and sharp as a lightning strike. "Hell, no. Wait, you guys go after racketeers and shit, right? Leroy would have done that."

"Did he?"

"We didn't hang out. We didn't like each other."

"Do you know anyone who might have wanted your brother dead?"

This time the laughter continued for several seconds. "Everyone who met him. Maybe not the Devil, 'cause he would have had to take him in."

"Do you know anyone who wanted it bad enough to make it happen?" Hafidha asked cheerfully. Reyes was doing enough straight-arrow professional for both of them.

Little turned to Hafidha, frowning. "If they did, they missed their fuckin' chance. Didn't they? It was an accident."

It was a frayed wire on a garbage disposal that routed the wall current through Leroy Valejo's kitchen sink faucet. Saying so would only make him look less murdered. "Then was there anyone who was especially happy about it?"

"Look, my brother was a shit. The only reason he wasn't a badass was because he wouldn't do anything that'd get him hurt. But he didn't care what happened to anybody else. Leroy was crooked as a three-dollar bill--said working for the tribes made you a tourist Indian, but truth was, none of 'em would hire him."

"He cheated people?" Hafidha asked, just to be sure.

"He wanted to get rich, and he didn't want to spend anything to get it. What do you think? You seen his buildings?"

"He owned two apartment buildings, didn't he?" said Reyes.

"I wouldn't keep a dog there. If it cost money to meet code, he didn't meet code. Tenants'd complain to the city and he'd kick 'em out. He'd find an excuse."

Hafidha leaned her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands and projected, *Give me the dirt*. "Lawsuits?"

"Shit, yeah. But he was good at hiding money from lawyers. There was a kid fell through a busted second-floor railing, cracked his hip in three places. Leroy's own damn lawyer told him to settle, but no, Leroy dragged it out for two years in court. Still at it when he died, I think. There was a grandma in a first-floor, the security door on her apartment wouldn't lock." Little shook her head, glared down at the printed fruit of the oilcloth on the table. "A fucking lock. How much does that cost? Couple of junkies broke in one night, beat her up, robbed her. She laid on the kitchen floor all night. Died in the hospital of pneumonia. Her son sued Leroy, but the son lost."

"He *lost*?" Oops. That disbelieving squeak might discourage the witness.

Little scowled down at the table as if she could cut through it with her laser vision.

Reyes settled his own elbows on the oilcloth. "For someone who didn't hang out with him, you seem to know a lot about your brother." He had one of his poker faces working, the one that said, *I know what cards you're holding. Did I mention I'm psychic?* The sweat pebbling his forehead and spotting the front of his dress shirt didn't lessen the effect.

Little raised her head and looked, if Hafidha was judging it right, over Reyes's shoulder. "Family. What else is there to talk about at Christmas?"

"Where did you live before you moved to this house?" Reyes's voice was gentle.

Damn the man. Still faster than me. "For the woman's son to lose that lawsuit, somebody must have testified for Leroy. Somebody who'd swear that lock worked."

Little sucked her lips in over her teeth and stared an inch past Hafidha's face. "Maybe the son hired a crappy lawyer."

Reyes shook his head and laid his small, manicured hand flat, halfway between himself and Little. Comfort, compromise. "Ms. Little, I apologize. You must feel as if you're on trial. We just want to know about your brother."

Hafidha noted he didn't say that Little *wasn't* on trial.

Little drew breath loudly through her nose and interlaced her fingers, thumbs twisting like snakes. "I asked my ex for help. He came through. He helped me get a job, food stamps, section eight. After the-- After Leroy won that lawsuit, I knew I had to move out."

"You were managing the apartment buildings."

Little nodded shortly, once. "I didn't have anyplace to go."

"And you lied for him."

Now that the truth was out, Little seemed numb. "He said he'd get me busted if I didn't, hide coke in my apartment. And the old lady was already dead, it didn't change that. I tried to fix the lock. He wouldn't pay for a locksmith. He said if I couldn't fix it, it was my problem."

Hafidha studied Little's downturned face and thought, *Nothing like on-site interviews to bring those public records to life.*

"Did you believe him?" Reyes asked, so kindly Hafidha almost didn't recognize the voice as his.

"Huh?"

"That it was your problem."

Little was silent for so long Hafidha had to sneak a look at Reyes for reassurance.

"I was sorry," Little muttered at last. "I couldn't give that guy money, for his mom. I didn't have enough to pay for a mass, but I lit candles for her at San Felipe."

Reyes nodded. "Did that help?"

Little raised her head and met his eyes. "It was kind of like the lawsuit. She was still dead."

They gathered the names of the old woman, the injured boy's family, others Little could remember. It was a formality; Hafidha could get them off the web in five minutes. But the commitment of a witness to a narrative meant something.

As she and Reyes walked back to the SUV, Hafidha asked, "So who has the bigger grudge against Leroy Valejo? The parents of the crippled kid, or the son of the dead mom?"

"Could be either," Reyes said, and chirped the door locks. As they slid into their seats, he added, "But neither has as big a grudge as his sister."

Hafidha stared. "Oh. He told her it was her problem. And she believed him. But is that kind of guilt enough to trigger conversion?"

Reyes started the engine. "Obviously, you've never been a Catholic."

"Very funny. I'll see if I can connect her to any other victims. Though family hate is a very special hate."

"It's the sense of betrayal. They should be there for you. When they fail you, it breaks the whole world."

Hafidha wanted to pull her laptop out of her bag and open it and go to work, because it was the only way to get out of a conversation in a moving car that didn't involve road rash. Instead, as Reyes braked for a light, she said, "You know, I heard you stopped Esther when she started across the yard." When Chaz had staggered out of his grandparents' house in Texas, not dead but in sight of it, and Esther Falkner had started to his aid.

"I was wrong."

"Hello? You were *what*?"

Reyes gave her the narrow-eyed look that froze other people to silence and gave even her a mild case of air conditioning. "Stupid people refuse to learn from their mistakes. I may be a sonofabitch, but no one ever called me stupid."

"Beg your pardon. I was extrapolating on the sonofabitch part, and went too far."

The corner of his mouth tugged upward. Reyes usually responded well to openness and honesty. Maybe he thought they were funny. "I didn't trust

Chaz, and I should have. Unfortunately, trust is not one of the things I'm good at. Chaz took more than his share of the weight of that. I'm sorry for it. I'll try to do better."

Hafidha watched a series of fake-Santa-Fe-style strip malls go by before she said, "I'm not the one you need to say this to."

"On the contrary. He doesn't know I'm guilty. You do."

"And if he finds out?"

"I expect he will. But I'd rather not admit I'm wrong and offer an apology until I'm sure his heart can take the stress."

Hafidha allowed him to drop the subject. Anyone but Stephen Reyes might have thought she was letting him off.

Act III

Daphne unwrapped the second half of her turkey pita and ate it off her lap while Todd drove. New Mexico unrolled outside the windows like a panopticon strip of polychromed stucco, saw-tooth mountains, and impossible cobalt sky. The vehicle's interior was full of the scent of Todd's coffee and the sound of *eric clapton unplugged*, turned down low enough that it became soothing background noise.

She sighed and stretched her legs out, contemplating the art of the nap. "You can put your feet up on the dash," Todd said, without glancing over. "If that would be more comfortable."

"Ever seen a radiograph of somebody who had their feet up when an airbag deployed?" She shuddered.

"If I had, would I keep my feet on the floor?"

She nodded emphatically. "Talk about your really spectacular dislocations." She took another bite of sandwich, chewing thoughtfully, staring out the window at scrub and pale desert. Heat shimmered over tile rooftops and the blacktop before them. *Chaz would love this. Desert rat.*

She pushed the thought away before it could make her eyes sting, staring down at the sandwich in her hands.

Todd cleared his throat. "How is it?"

"Stale, but meeting or exceeding federal requirements for airport food."

Todd chuckled, which destroyed her own deadpan. She rewrapped up the rest of the sandwich and stuffed it into the door pocket. If she craned a little bit, she could read the GPS, but right now it only showed a straight stretch of highway. Todd, noticing her interest, quoted, "The lone and level sands stretch far away."

"Who's our first stop?"

"Karina Foundline," he said. "The attempted-triple-homicide survivor."

Daphne paged through scans on her Palm, but it was mostly for something to do with her hands. "Right. She identified a suspect, a Michael Parker, but the D.A. failed to get a conviction. He's the one who died on New Year's Day, just after midnight, when a bullet discharged into the air in celebration penetrated his brain. Welcome to the Southwest, where we believe in random gunfire." Speaking of radiographs, here was one, the hole in Parker's skull brightly outlined by metal trace.

"The Mythbusters debunked that," Todd said. "Terminal velocity of a bullet isn't enough to puncture a human skull."

"Ballistic trajectory," she replied. "Apparently the Mythbusters get a few wrong. Wow, it looks like it hit right on the suture point. That's freaky."

"You'd almost think somebody planned it that way."

"Gamma could affect a bullet's trajectory," she said. She gestured at a road warning sign as they approached a bridge. *Gusty Winds May Exist*. "If a stiff breeze can do it--"

"I always thought those signs were a little weird," he said. "Land of Enchantment? Land of Existentialism."

"More like the Land of Quantum Uncertainty. New Mexico: it's not real. It's just more likely to be here than not be here."

Todd spit coffee back into his paper cup in preference to spraying the windshield. "A palpable hit. So you think maybe the gamma's a small-scale telekinetic, like Desiree Greene in Louisiana in February?"

"Cripes, I hope not." Desiree Greene, who'd dropped a rose window on Reyes's head and nicked his radial artery. Her hands clenched against the vivid tactile memory of sliding on his blood while she tried to keep pressure on the wound. She forced them open again. "You got her, though."

"Yeah," he said. His hand barely twitched towards his service weapon. "We did."

*

Foundline now lived with her aunt and two nephews in a first-story two-bedroom rental on the outskirts of town. The aunt, Annabel, let them into the living room, which was shabbily tidy and furnished with sagging castoffs.

Foundline waited on a couch before the front window, outlined against the light burning through closed blinds. Her worn colorful clothes were clean and her hair dressed back in tight braids that must have taken her aunt hours, but Daphne understood why she'd chosen to sit there, with the light at her back. She'd sustained--and survived--two close-range gunshot wounds to the face, and the scarring was... significant.

It can't be that easy, Daphne thought. She watched Foundline's thin hands twist around each other because she needed a moment before she looked back at the rucked and furrowed flesh of her face. She shot a glance at Todd and saw him looking back, eyebrow arched, contemplative.

"I'm sorry," Foundline said, her words slurring as if through clenched teeth. "I can't talk so good anymore. But I'm happy to answer your questions."

"I'm Special Agent Todd. This is Special Agent Worth. We're very sorry for your injury, Ms. Foundline," Todd said, lowering himself to the edge of the chair opposite.

Daphne sidestepped to stand behind him, the back of the chair concealing her right hand and her gun. She wondered for a second when she'd become such a seamless part of the organism, and how it had been decided with a glance that Todd would take point and she would cover his back.

"My own--my own stupid fault," she said. Her hands clenched on her knees, arms straightening, as if to push her through the back of the couch. "I got in with a bad crowd. I got--and Sheila--" She shook her head. "Sorry. Sorry."

"It's okay," Todd said. Everything about him--the tweed jacket, the disarrayed and receding dull brown hair, the pale eyes concealed behind spectacles--said *I am small and unassuming*. He looked like an actuary. Daphne knew it was a magic trick, but that didn't always stop it from working on her. "Take your time. I know this is hard. You testified that you and Sheila Wilson were at the trailer of a friend. Donyell Douglas."

"My boyfriend," Foundline said. Her fingers pressed to her gnarled cheek as if unconsciously. When she smiled, it stretched her face in unsettling ways. "The bad crowd. He liked guns. He dealt a little coke." She shrugged. "I thought he was sexy. Mike came to talk to him about some money he owed. It didn't go so well. Mike made me and my friend Sheila sit on the couch. When he didn't get what he wanted out of Donyell, he shot him. And then he shot us."

She recited her story with the air of long practice and many repetitions, professionally, detached. Her hand slipped down to press her breastbone. "Me twice in the head, once in the chest. I was--I used to be pretty. Would you believe it?"

Daphne nodded. The aunt was in the kitchen, in earshot and just inside her peripheral vision, fussing with a cheap white plastic coffee maker. "You must have been quite beautiful," she said. "What happened at the trial?"

She knew, and Todd knew, but they had to hear it in Foundline's words.

Foundline closed her eyes. "My momma told me never to use... never to hate unless I really mean it. Unless the person I was hating deserved the worst thing ever. Well, I really, really hated him. I feel blessed to have my life, but I would have given it for my friend. She was pregnant. She had a baby coming."

"I am so sorry," Todd said. He sounded like he meant it. "You loved your friend very much."

It was a good thing he filled the silence, because Foundline's choice of words made Daphne cock her head. She didn't lean forward, but she let herself re-examine Foundline, the room, the things in it. Nothing you wouldn't expect in a poor family's apartment, except--around Foundline's neck, almost hidden in her cleavage, hung a crocheted pouch the size of Daphne's thumb, hanging from a drawstring cord.

Foundline said, "She was my best friend."

"Ms. Foundline," Daphne said. "The trial."

"The jury didn't think I was a what do you call it. Credible witness. Because of the drugs. And because I--" she glanced over toward the kitchen, where the aunt had now vanished out of sight, and lowered her voice. "I got busted once for turning tricks."

Todd nodded, face still neutral and welcoming, and Daphne saw some of the tension drain out of Foundline's posture. She glanced down between her knees, hunching forward.

"Ms. Foundline," Daphne said, "May we see your bedroom?"

"What do you need that for?"

Daphne smiled. "Sometimes, learning a little more about the survivors can tell us a lot more about the crime."

Foundline stood up, stiffly, like a woman three times her age. "Let me ask my aunt. We have to share."

*

A tiny room, just big enough for the twin bed jammed against one wall and the sofa bed in the opposite corner. Two four-legged stools had been pressed into service as nightstands, and a little end table under the window was draped in a purple cotton gauze scarf, with two candlesticks and a water goblet set on it. Daphne also identified a single white rose in a narrow vase, a tiny brass incense burner, a Georgia O'Keeffe landscape postcard leaned up against the wall, a string of agate beads, and a black-handled paring knife.

Daphne made a moue and stopped herself from nodding. Could be nothing. Could be something. You never knew.

They made their excuses. Outside, while she called to check in with Reyes and give him their twenty, Todd leaned against the door of the SUV, staring west. She clicked the phone off and came up beside him.

"Desert sunset," he said. "Nothing like it."

There wasn't. A pale wash of gold and pink stained the western horizon, light gleaming peach-rose off a crossing jet contrail.

"You think she's a gamma?"

"I think she doesn't eat much because it hurts her to chew," Daphne said. "I also think she's a witch. Did you catch the amulet and altar?"

Todd nodded. "Not a *bruja*?"

Daphne shook her head. "That's modern Wicca, the crocheted amulet and the altar setup."

He was watching her sideways, with a little smile. Not the condescending one she would have expected from Brady, but something more open and considering. Of course; Duke didn't judge other people's belief systems, and he got weirder things than her free with his breakfast cereal. Still, she felt the need to explain.

"I went through a Lesbian Empowerment phase in college," she said.

"You believe in that?"

"What, Lesbian Empowerment?"

"Very funny."

"I believe in the power of the human mind to change its environment," she answered, archly enough that he tapped his forehead and mouthed *touché*. "Reyes said Brady checked in. He and Lau broke down the patterns and periods of travel, and it doesn't look like a trucker or a salesman. And it doesn't happen with the kind of regularity you'd expect from someone taking vacation from a day job."

"So it's something else," Todd said. He reached into his pocket and chirped the door locks. "Come on. Next stop, the scenic trailer of one Hal Carter."

*

That night, Todd crossed the hotel corridor and double-tapped a knuckle on the door of room 118, not loudly enough to wake a sleeper. Not that he expected his quarry to be asleep even this late, but he prided himself on his sense of timing, particularly when it came to polite fictions.

Even so, it was long enough that he wondered if he ought to knock again, before the door opened.

Reyes was still dressed. "The day wasn't long enough for you?" he asked. But he stood aside to let Todd pass.

The bedclothes remained as smooth as Housekeeping could make them. Reyes's laptop sat open on the desk, surrounded by neat piles of case jackets and notes. CNN muttered on the television, barely audible. The room smelled like takeout green chile and whatever noxious, flowery substance the hotel used to clean the carpets. "'Will the day's journey take the whole long day?'" Todd quoted absently. "'From morn to night, my friend.'"

"And since I happen to know that's Christina Rossetti, I also know she was a Christian mystic, and the reference is a metaphor."

"I could have quoted Robert Erskine Chalders, instead. '...Simple and inevitable, like lying down after a long day's work.'" Todd sat on the end of the bed and folded his hands between his knees, a confluence of bony joints.

"That always sounded to me like taking radical acceptance too far. Execution is neither simple nor inevitable." Reyes swung the desk chair around to face the bed, sat, and scoured his face with his palms. "Did you wander by to test the extent of my education, or are you chewing over something a little less nebulous?"

"Oh, it's at least that nebulous. But work-related. I'm concerned about matters at home."

"I shouldn't have to say this out loud, but I had good reason for leaving Brady and Lau in D.C."

"And Falkner?" Todd asked, and knew his face was as unalarming as it had ever been in his life.

Reyes sat very straight, his hands anchored on his thighs. "You think we need two ranking agents in the field on this case?"

"I think you and Esther work very well together, given that there's something busted between you."

The desk lamp was mostly behind Reyes, fringing his cropped hair with light and hiding his expression. "Why don't you ask Esther?"

"Because the snowplows would be working in Hell before she'd tell me."

"And I'm notoriously indiscreet?"

"That, certainly." Todd smiled at the toes of his loafers, and Reyes snorted. "But mostly because I'm guessing it's your story to tell, if you want it told."

On the TV screen, Anderson Cooper looked solemn as a basset hound in front of tan desert and a bit of broken wall. Todd had always been grateful he wasn't pretty enough for broadcast journalism.

Reyes sighed. "I made a bad mistake twelve years ago. I only recently realized how bad. If I had it to do over, I'm not sure I could do better. But I didn't try hard enough to do better at the time."

"It's not like Falkner to hold a grudge. Especially a twelve-year-old grudge."

"There's forgive, and there's forget. It's... changed her opinion of me."

"It's about Chaz, isn't it?"

A particularly bright image on the television cast light on Reyes's face, showed the controlled grimace there. "You're not really asking."

"No. Not really."

"I didn't trust him."

"Yet you trust Hafidha."

"I have plenty of excuses for past behavior. They don't matter." Reyes's words were precisely formed, like someone talking over a bad connection. "The only way I can make up for this is to go forward and behave differently."

"Because you can't make it up to a thirteen-year-old kid who isn't there anymore."

Silence, except for the whisper of a bearded man's voice from the television, the mutter of a translator following behind. "It's nice to be sure we're on the same subject," Reyes said.

"Steve, remember who you're talking to. I'm Paper Trail Guy."

"And after Texas, Chaz doesn't have many secrets left." Changeable as the moon, the TV's light. Todd wasn't sure if it was that, or if Reyes's eyebrows really did twitch downward. "Apparently, neither do I."

"No, no. I'm not, as the kids say, all up in your shit." Todd beamed at him, and made him snort. "But it's enough to have to roll the rock up the hill. You

don't have to make sure no one's watching when you do it."

"I'm certain that will seem like good advice, as soon as I figure out what it means."

"I'm full of folksy wisdom. Ask anybody."

"Fine. Sol, we've got twenty-seven people whose deaths were also not simple or inevitable. In..." Reyes glanced at the bedside clock. "...seven hours we're on our way to Las Cruces. Does folksy wisdom suggest a decent night's sleep before a day of work?"

"It does." Todd stood and stretched. "I came to tell you to get one."

"Out," said Reyes, with nothing worse than resignation.

*

Brady pushed away his empty mug and settled into a pleasant buzz of caffeine and adrenaline, highlighters and printouts spread on the briefing room table. He didn't look up when the door opened, because he recognized the click of low heels. Might as well play the scene the way it presented itself.

The scent of coffee preceded Lau into the room. "Whatcha got?" she said, leaning over his shoulder to set one of the two blue mugs by his hand.

"A psychic partner, apparently," he said, snaking the mug between piles.

"I'd have brought you more yummy Las Cruces interviews, but Dad just called a time-out for lunch." Lau cast a bleak look down the table. "We're running out of flat space."

"It's a good thing Duke types a hundred and twenty words a minute and Hafidha's a human keyboard, or we'd be transcribing recordings of more witness statements than you want to imagine. As it is..." He picked three stapled printouts off the nearest pile and held them over his shoulder. "Grab a highlighter. I'm just going over them for coincidences and consistencies now. If this is all the work of the same gamma, he has to be finding them somehow. Where would you go to meet an asshole?"

"Singles bar," Lau said promptly, dropping into the chair beside him. "Executive retreat."

"Enron boardroom," he answered.

She uncapped a lavender highlighter. "Got anything consistent so far? Socioeconomic class, race, religion?"

"Nope. Age, gender, place of employment, hobbies--"

"Other than being a dick."

"Chaz's theory is panning out so far," he said, hoping she didn't notice the way the kid's name stuck in his throat for a half-second.

But she was Lau, and she did notice. He knew, because he caught her looking to see if he was looking. "Danny," she said.

He flipped pages.

She cleared her throat. "You could go see him."

"I did."

There. Huh. What was that? Something snagging at the edge of his attention. Chaz would have been on it like butter on biscuits, but not everybody could have superpowers, or they would stop being superpowers.

"You could go see him while he's awake to appreciate--"

"Nikki. Back to the religion thing. You notice anything even a little statistically unusual about the ones you've got there?"

"Of the victims or the associates?"

"Associates."

"You're not getting out of this that easily, Danny boy." But she fell silent, flipping pages, bent over the pile of paperwork with her forehead resting on the back of her left hand. "Asatru? What's that?"

"Google it. But I've got a bet. Here, look at this. Pagan, Wiccan. Dianic? That's got to be some kind of heathen. Catholic. More Catholic. What's that all got in common?"

"Swiping wholesale from other religions?"

"Hah. Ritual magic, you secular humanist."

"*Catholic?*"

"In the *Southwest*? You need to meet a *bruja*, that'll widen your perception of Christianity."

Her eyes widened. She grabbed her phone.

"What are you doing?"

She punched something on speed dial and grinned. "Calling Hafidha, and telling her to check the credit card histories of the associates for charges to local or online Catholic and New Age bookstores, that's what."

"Smart!" he said, while she tapped her forehead and waited for Hafidha to answer the phone.

*

"Witchcraft," Hafidha said.

It was a weird word to hear stated plainly amid the grungy orange-and-blue Southwestern decor of the taqueria. Daphne twisted in her chair to see Hafidha's face. "I beg your pardon?"

Hafidha leaned her laptop bag against the side of the booth before she scootched in next to Daphne. Across the table, Todd pressed toward the window to make room for Reyes, who slid into the booth with a grateful sigh and the wince of a man whose feet were not what they used to be. *Someday*, Daphne thought, *I'm going to tell him they've invented orthopedic shoes.* As if his vanity would permit that.

Hafidha flattened her hands, fingers interlaced, on the plastic-coated placemat printed with local ads. "Okay, we're not even close to done with these interviews, but even out of our partial data and the old interviews, Brady and Lau picked out a pattern. Seven of the victims--including all five of our Albuquerque possibles--had a close associate who either dabbles in ritual magic, or who we can at least make an educated guess about. I pulled credit card records. A statistically significant number of family-and-associates shop at the kind of stores that sell smudging bundles, prayer bowls, and brightly-colored paperbacks by people with names involving a celestial object and an animal. And--" She spread her hands, *Voila!* "--every single area with a death, in all four states, has one thing in common. A big enough woo-woo community to support some kind of hippie bookstore or cafe."

Daphne pushed a basket of tortilla chips and a menu in front of Hafidha and felt the almost physical sensation of a penny dropping. "One of the victims, too," she said. "Norma Cassidy, the abusive stepmom."

"The one who caught MRSA off a cat food can lid?" Todd asked, balancing a salsa-dripping chip over his opposite hand.

Daphne turned on her Palm, and with a few quick gestures had Cassidy's photo up. "See the necklace?" She pointed to the barbed silver circle on a chain. "It's called a horned moon. It's a symbol of the triple goddess. Dianic Wicca, a sometimes radical feminist offshoot of Gardnerian practice."

"I didn't know you were an expert on comparative Paganism," Reyes said, leaning back against the booth cushion as if to get a wide-angle view of her.

"I'm just full of secrets. Imagine a world in which you knew them all."

Reyes frowned. She raised her eyebrows the way Hafidha would if she were sassing Reyes, and waited to see if he was going to let her get away with it. A year ago, she never would have imagined having the courage to tease him, but after seven seconds of his best forbidding stoneface the corner of his mouth twitched upward and he turned back to the menu. Daphne grinned after him until Todd broke the silence with a crunch.

"Imagine a world in which I could order the margarita," he said with his mouth full. "Alas, something tells me we're in for a long day. You know something else that's weird. We don’t have any evidence that the majority of the victims--Cassidy aside--have any connection to ritual magic. And Foundline didn't set my Spidey sense tingling, not that hunches are admissible in court."

"Mine either," Daphne agreed, contemplating *tamales de pollo* and green chile that wouldn't be as good as Chaz's. "With the same caveats about it not being conclusive."

Reyes closed his menu. "Are you suggesting it's a false lead?"

Todd shook his head as the waitress returned. "I'm just saying correlation is not insert catchphrase here. There are a lot of possibilities. I'd like the posole, please?" He glanced sidelong at Hafidha. "And two orders of queso."

There was a brief conversational hiatus while they completed their orders and water glasses were refilled. Then Daphne said, "So if the witchcraft

thing is a red herring, what's our connection?"

"I'm not saying it's a red herring," Todd replied. "I'm saying I'm having a hard time imagining how one gamma managed to meet all these victims, even if a statistically significant number of them have some connection to alternative religion."

Hafidha snorted. "You make it sound like acupuncture. You don't think we've got multiple bogeys?"

Reyes's hands closed on the table edge, not hard. Daphne thought an effort lay behind his gentleness. "Your evolving-anomaly theory?"

Hafidha tipped her head from side to side, making her braids swing. "I'm just trying to be open to the possibilities, kemo sabe. Thinking outside the box. In any case, I don't think we have enough data yet."

Bowls of guacamole, sour cream, melted cheese, and more salsa began arriving on the table, and a plate of nachos the size of an ocean liner made port in front of Hafidha. Daphne tucked her hands under the edge of the tablecloth so she could twist them in her lap, out of sight. Hafidha waved her tablemates in to contribute to the destruction of the nachos, but Daphne found her appetite abruptly fled.

Which also made her think of Chaz. Which removed any possibility that she might regain said appetite in the near future. She pushed her plate away and pretended to scratch her chest, pressing the pendant hard against bone.

"Or maybe we have too much data," Todd said. "No conclusions, anyway."

"Nothing so far," Reyes said. "But tomorrow, I think we start on the book stores."

*

Brady grimaced down the briefing closet table to Lau, who in turn raised her eyebrows at Falkner. "Okay," Lau said. "So we've got a black magic gamma."

"Argh." Brady rubbed his eyes. "Earworm." He wondered what the radio presets were on that stranded Audi. If he had a few minutes' down time, he could call the number on the business card he'd tucked under the corner of his blotter to dry. *Chrissake. Earth to Brady. Focus.*

"Sorry," Lau said. "Didn't think."

Falkner, back pressed to the wall, steepled her hands in front of her face. "Got a guess at a manifestation?"

"It's all small shit," Brady said, flipping pages. "Frayed insulation, broken glass, distracted drivers. Gravity. There's no consistent mechanism. It's not like we've got to worry about somebody throwing lightning bolts or balls of fire. Not that that would be sustainable anyway. You might get a burner in breakthrough, but I don't think they could live through it, and this has been going on a long time."

Lau nibbled polish off the edge of her thumbnail. "What if his manifestation is just...luck? Good luck, bad luck. Really, really, really bad luck."

"Weird luck. We have one of those," Brady said. "And Duke's not an a-- not a jammer."

"No," Falkner agreed. She stood away from the wall, hands fisted in the small of her back. For a moment, Brady's profiler-brain kicked in, and he imagined the pain she'd endured while pregnant. No wonder the second kid was adopted.

He shook his head. She cocked hers at him with birdlike interest. "You disagree, Special Agent?"

"No," he said, looking down. "Just shaking off an unproductive chain of thought. Duke's not a jammer. He's just a locus of coincidences."

Falkner nodded agreement. "Excuse the digression. Nikki, please finish your thought."

"What I was thinking was, what if a gamma could affect somebody else's luck? Change it for the absolute worst?" Lau hesitated, but managed to get herself around the words and squeeze them out. "*Hex* people."

"You think it's something that isn't distance limited?"

"Witchcraft doesn't rely on proximity," Lau said. "The mythology supports a remote effect."

Brady reached for his coffee mug, an excuse to sit silent while the implications worked themselves out in his head. "That would be bad," he said, when he had swallowed.

Mutely, fingers twitching as if she wanted to reach for a tool or a weapon, Lau nodded. She needed to *do* something about it, and that was Lau all over--the anchor detail of a complex character. Brady felt a rush of affection for her and looked at Falkner so he wouldn't give it away with a smile.

Falkner was frowning at Lau. "Call Reyes. Tell him bullets won't work on this gamma."

Lau didn't say *oh shit*, but her face said it for her, lips stretching flat in a scowl of dismay almost worthy of Chaz. "Too much can go wrong with a gun," she said.

Brady sucked in a hard breath. "Christ on a polo pony. We're fighting Murphy's Law."

*

Daphne disconnected the call from Reyes and looked over to Hafidha, who was driving. A slow desert sunset unwound across the dusty sky to the west, staining the tan earth and pale roofs of Las Cruces pink as a fresh scar. "Did you follow that from my end, or do you need a recap?"

Hafs glanced over. "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all. Something like that?"

"Expect the worst," Daphne said.

Even in profile, she could see Hafidha's smile. "I always do, Sis. You're not paranoid if they are out to get you."

Act IV

The storefront was just wide enough for a glass door and a little display window, both trimmed in blue enamel, and the sign over them that read "*Libreria de San Juan*." In the window, a carved and painted wooden saint smiled stiffly above the covers of a handful of books--*Hildegard of Bingen's Spiritual Remedies. Leyendas de la Santeria. Tarot of the Saints. Prayers and Rituals for Catholic Families. Meditation for Manifesting*--and CDs--*Guadelupe, Virgen de los Indios. Big Medicine. Immortal Fire: Music for Female Saints.*

Todd had a sudden itch (of which he was only a little ashamed) to ask Reyes if he was going to be okay in there. He held the door open instead.

The man unpacking a box on the counter beside the cash register looked like a retired Viking, with blue eyes, scorched-tan skin, and receding faded blond hair that brushed his collar. He looked up at the ping of the door and smiled, and Todd saw the white band at the collar of his short-sleeved shirt.

"Can I help you find something?" The priest sounded as if he meant exactly that, rather than, *You'd better not be planning to waste my time.*

Todd was careful not to flip his ID open in tandem with Reyes. Reminding witnesses of *Men in Black* tended to set the wrong tone for an interview.

"I'm Special Agent Reyes. This is Special Agent Todd. We're from the FBI."

The priest stared at them in an instant of blank, arrested movement. "Sorry," he said. "I was just searching my conscience for unauthorized video duplication. I'm Father Jay Monaghan." He thrust out his right hand to Reyes, who shook it, and then to Todd. It was large and dry, and the fingers and palm were calloused.

"Did you find any?" Todd couldn't resist asking.

"There, at least, I think I'm without sin. What can I do for you?"

Reyes slid the victim photos from the greater Las Cruces area out of the leather envelope case under his arm and fanned them on the counter. "Do you recognize any of these people?"

As Monaghan studied the photos, Todd stepped back to consider the shop.

It was as narrow as the front suggested, but deep. Two mismatched tables hugged by equally unrelated chairs drew a line down the middle of the floor. The shelves reached to the ceiling on every unbroken wall, studded with labels printed on the store's computer. *Palatino*, thought Todd, *the curse of the information age.* But they were readable from where he stood. Lives of the Saints, Women's Spirituality, Native Religions, Church History, Prayer and Meditation, Ritual, Theology, Eastern Religions, Earth-Centered Religion, Wellness, Psychology, Mysticism. Fiction (Shelved by Author). Todd noticed that divine intervention didn't do a better job than Barnes & Noble of producing a set of easily-distinguished categories.

The space between the display window and the front door served as a notice board, and it fluttered with ads for services, flyers for events. AA and NA meetings--a long list, given the size of Las Cruces. A Course in Miracles. Prayer Circle for Peace. Reiki healing. Santa Rosa de Lima pancake breakfast fundraiser.

"I'm sorry," Father Monaghan said at last. "This one--" He touched the photo of Lucas Castro lightly, left index finger to the dead man's shoulder. Castro had been fatally stabbed when a rifle with bayonet fixed, part of his collection of Nazi memorabilia, fell from the wall of his den. "--I might have seen him, but I'm not sure."

"Part of your congregation, maybe?" Reyes asked.

Monaghan smiled. "I'm semi-retired. I let younger, sturdier folks celebrate mass and offer communion these days, so I'm not face-to-face with parishioners much. But it could be." He put his fingertip to the photo again, this time outside Castro's image. "He looks like he has a hard life."

"Not anymore." The bland good-nature in Reyes's voice made Todd glance his way before he could stop himself. *Maybe we should have had that little talk outside the door after all.* "His death was ruled an accident, but the circumstances were suspicious."

Monaghan's lips moved, and his right hand sketched a small, quick cross on his body. He must have noticed how closely Reyes and Todd watched him; he raised one shoulder, an embarrassed shrug. "The older I get, the less comfortable I am with mortality. You'd think it would be the other way around."

"It's only a return to God," Reyes said.

Monaghan cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. Where had Todd seen that before? He had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing when he realized Reyes did it, questioning witnesses, before pouncing on an inconsistency in a story.

Monaghan asked, "When the FBI sends you out to investigate, are you content to come home with no answers and your work half-done?"

"What *is* your work, then?"

"Like most people, I'm not sure. A vocation isn't a to-do list. It's a way to do God's work, not the work itself."

"So you run this place," Todd offered. If this was going to be a good cop/bad cop story, it was time he added some dialogue. "For a Catholic book shop, it's pretty...eclectic."

"Conservatives in the diocese use a different word," Monaghan replied, straight-faced. "But as soon as you declare some areas of thought off-limits, you can't talk about them. People will still seek them out. They just won't discuss them with you. And if they don't, how can you point out the universality of God and redemption through actions?"

"That's a lot to get across at the cash register."

Monaghan waved toward the tables and chairs. "You should see this place on book club nights. Pretty lively for a little burg."

Todd could feel the information change shape in his head, just as it did when he was researching a story and the facts reached sufficient mass to show where their edges touched. *Meetings. Book clubs. One gamma...* "How often do you host events, and what kind?"

"Several different book discussion groups each month. Saturday workshops. Story time for kids. Book signings, when we can get them. We try to stock regional books, so there's an incentive for New Mexico and Arizona writers to visit, at least. We had a great workshop last month on ritual mask-making, led by a woman down from Taos." Monaghan grimaced. "Called for a bit of cleanup after, though."

Reyes was at Todd's shoulder. He'd caught the lead, too, and Todd could feel him taut and vibrating as a compass needle. "Do you have a list of your events?"

"For the month?"

"Ideally," Reyes said drily, "for the past seven years."

Monaghan blinked. "One of the kids in the work-study program set us up with a public Google calendar...two years ago, it would have been. Before that, I'd have to go through the files..." He looked over his shoulder at a four-drawer file cabinet with scratched black paint and one drawer out of true.

His expression suggested finding anything in it might be a heroic job. "May I ask why you want to know?"

"We're investigating a series of murders over the past seven years. We think the killer may be making contact with the victims through local...spiritual groups. Three individuals who were acquainted with people on our list of victims have made credit-card purchases here."

"I knew I should have stuck to cash and checks," Monaghan muttered. He jerked his gaze up to Reyes's bird-of-prey stare and grimaced: *Did I say that out loud?* "Sorry again. I come from a long line of Irish Catholics. The anti-authoritarian baggage is part of the heritage."

Reyes let him sweat in the headlights for another second before he said, "Let's start with the calendar. Then, if you don't object, Agent Todd and I can help find the records we're looking for." His mouth twitched, one-sided, and Todd thought, *Yes, I'm Document Guy. Thanks for the vote of confidence. If I don't retire soon, I'm going to die of chronic paper cuts.*

Monaghan crouched and tucked a slab of blank sheets awkwardly into the printer shelved below the counter. Then he turned to the yellowed keyboard and almost-new monitor on a folding patio table behind him. "Printer's kind of slow," he said. A grunt, before he added, "And so am I. I might have to print these one at a... Wait, what does this do--"

While Monaghan clicked at his mouse, Todd sidled over to take a better look at the flyers on the notice board. This was a community nexus, from the looks of it, not just for inquisitive Catholics, but for the neighborhood. He spotted a business card advertising custom sewing and alterations, and another offering licensed child care. And a slightly larger notice, with a fringe of tear-off phone numbers on the bottom, that read, "Prayer is Powerful! We join our hearts & souls to ask for blessings. Why not yours? In numbers there is MIRACLES!" Todd winced at the grammar and tore off a phone number slip.

The printer made chunking, grinding sounds, but, however reluctantly, produced printout. Behind Todd, Reyes said, "As I recall, the author objects strongly to the Church's actions in the Southwest."

Todd turned to find Reyes holding up a hardcover. *On the Bloody Road to Jesus: Christianity and the Chiricahua Apaches*. A good cover: in vernacular

style, a painting of an Apache man on a cross.

Monaghan peered at it and nodded. "And those of other Christian denominations. She's right." He scooped pages out of the printer tray and added, "The Church isn't Christ. It's a community of men and women, with all our flaws and sins."

"I bet your bishop loves you."

Monaghan grinned. "Why do you think I'm semi-retired?"

Jesuits and troublemakers, Todd reflected. *A thorn in the Church's side since*-- He couldn't remember the date of the first suppression of the Jesuits. Chaz would remember.

That, of course, made grief and fear and anger rise like a bubble of poison in his guts. He pushed them down and said, "Hand me a few feet of the contents of that filing cabinet, and I'll get started on the paper records."

Monaghan struggled with the off-kilter drawer first. Under cover of the rattling, Todd leaned toward Reyes and muttered, "So, did you learn your interrogation style in catechism class?"

Reyes gave him nothing more than a raised eyebrow, but Todd was satisfied.

*

Daphne stuffed her map of the Las Cruces crime scenes back in her bag, and dropped it into the passenger-side footwell in front of her. No particular correlation of scenes or victim residences with any of the bookstores; Las Cruces was too damned small, too easy to drive across to get what you wanted.

"I turned up something we can use while you were on the phone." Hafidha said, patting the closed laptop on the console beside her.

"I wish you wouldn't Internets and drive."

Hafidha tossed purple-streaked braids. "Pshaw. Nonsense! Do you want to hear it?"

Daphne spread her hands. Of course she did.

Hafidha said, "Three years back, Las Cruces had a witchcraft scare. Desmond Latimer, who is apparently a fire-and-brimstone preacher who will

be played by a resurrected James Brown in the movie version, raised a stink after witches of a local coven threatened--get this, in a letter to the editor of the *Las Cruces Sun-News*--to hex a contractor accused of shoddy building practices that had led to several unprosecuted deaths."

"People actually paid *attention* to the witches?"

Hafidha snapped with her right hand. "The contractor was Jason Bonneventure. Chain link fence guy."

"Ouch," Daphne said, remembering. He'd been crushed to death under a construction fence when a cement mixer on one of his job sites, uninsured and driven by an unlicensed driver, caught the edge of the chain link and kept going. Unable to resist, she deadpanned, "I guess it made an impression."

Hafidha groaned. "So guess what the name of the high priest of the coven in question was?"

"No, seriously? David Tawayo?"

"The owner of the book store we are en route to," Hafidha confirmed. "None other."

"Think he's our gamma?"

She licked her lips. "I don't think he's not. I think we ought to check out Latimer, too. What's the name of the place again?"

"Silver Wolf Ritual Goods," Daphne said, not bothering to conceal her dismay. "Should be off to the left."

"I see it." Hafidha hit the blinker and waited for a break in traffic, giving Daphne time to lean forward and check out the L-shaped yellow-and-orange strip mall with its much-patched parking lot. The pagan bookstore was in the dogleg of the building, low-angled evening sun sliding under the overhang to illuminate its door and sign.

Hafidha parked the suburban assault vehicle. When she and Daphne opened the doors and stepped down, Daphne thought she shut the door a little harder than necessary. "You okay?"

Hafidha nodded. "Just not looking forward to this. You know how I feel about the woo-woo everything-is-interconnected shit."

"Unhappy," Daphne guessed.

Hafidha grinned at her through braids like a beaded curtain, patting the grip of her Glock. "It's so unscientific."

Daphne got the door, silver metal handle wrapped in a grubby white towel so it wouldn't burn unwary hands, and followed Hafidha inside to the chime of Tibetan bells. It smelled like a pagan bookstore, all right, musty with mingled aromas of frankincense, sage, joss sticks, and dragon's blood. A thin pall of smoke snaked along the ceiling tiles, layering a bitter tang of copal over everything.

Just inside the doorway, Hafidha sneezed. "Smells like a head shop in here," she said softly, so Daphne had to fake a sneeze too or burst out laughing.

A trim dark-bearded white man behind the counter looked up. The store wasn't big, but Daphne didn't think Hafidha's comment had been loud enough to carry over the Tuvan throat singing that played from speakers mounted on the wall behind him. There was one other person in the store, a brown-haired female customer thumbing through a slim red-bound paperback over by the CD-packed bookshelf that served as the music department.

"Welcome," the counterman said as they came forward through a series of gateways formed by glass-shelved display cases.

Daphne brushed past Hafidha and strode forward, secure in the knowledge that her partner had her flank. "David Tawayo?"

He nodded.

"Hello," she said, producing her ID folder. "I'm Special Agent Worth. This is Special Agent Gates. FBI. We'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

She'd expected him to withdraw, to fold up into himself and extrude spines of wariness. She hadn't expected the slam of a suddenly closed expression or the way he physically leaned away from the counter when she approached, and she filed it away for later consideration. He lifted his chin and kept his hands on the counter when she extended the folder, but he did look down his nose to inspect it in a manner that told her he was wearing bifocals. He checked Hafidha's ID carefully, too, glancing from the photo to her face and back again.

It was always nicer when they'd shake your hand, but at least he hadn't bolted for the back door.

"Sure, I'd be happy to help," he said in a tone that could not have made the polite fiction any plainer. "But I'm not sure what I know that could interest the FBI."

"We're investigating the death of one of your customers," Daphne said. "Norma Cassidy. Do you remember her?"

His mouth worked. She could feel Hafidha stepping back, widening her arc of control to include the book-flipping customer. Tawayo had glanced over at the customer, and Daphne's peripheral vision had caught enough movement to tell her that the customer had looked up from her book.

"Norma was a regular," he said. "She died from an infection, though. I never heard there was anything else to it."

His voice went up at the end involuntarily, as if he were asking a question. A thrill chased up Daphne's neck, lifting the fine hairs of her nape. She fought the urge to smooth them with her hand, converting the gesture to slide her folder back into the pocket of her gray blazer.

Jackpot, she thought. When a sideways glance at Hafidha netted her a nod, she decided to push her luck.

She smiled and said, "We have reason to believe it might have been linked to the death of Jason Bonneventure."

Tawayo rolled his eyes. "You don't need to look any farther than his own negligence for that."

Daphne smiled. "Pretty poetic justice, wouldn't you say?"

Tawayo looked down. "Whatever you do comes back to you threefold," he said. "That doesn't just apply to ritual, Agent Worth. It applies to how we live in the world. Everything you do is magic. *Do as thou wilt, an it harm none*, sure. But there are other laws as well. We're not Christians. Ours is not a religion of victims. We allow for self-defense. But I wouldn't expect you to understand that."

She let her hands rest at her sides, non-threatening. And, incidentally, brushing her holster. She really wanted to reach inside her collar and lift

Chaz's pendant out, just to see what his eyes would do, but instead she nodded. "I would expect somebody who was publicly calling for hexes to be more along the lines of *Do as thou wilt is the whole of the law.*"

"A witch who can't curse cannot heal," he said, eyeing her. "But casting hexes isn't illegal. It's prayer. Hecate's justice cannot be legislated."

The first sentence was Z. Budapest, and it surprised her a little that a man had read the work of such an outspokenly feminist witch--or perhaps he'd only heard it quoted. But Daphne had read that last sentence somewhere too, and knew it was also a quote from the radical end of Wicca. She'd have Hafidha Google it as soon as they hit the door.

"We're not here to arrest you," she said. "We're just looking into the deaths. Do you know of anyone else associated with the local pagan community who might have hated both people enough to make arrangements for them to die?"

"The deaths were accidental." He folded his arms.

Footsteps and the rustle of paper as a book closed told Daphne that the customer was coming closer. Hafidha swung sideways, so Daphne had the door and Hafidha had both interviewees, and Daphne simultaneously took a long step back.

"I'm Emily," the customer said. "Emily Davenport. I couldn't help but overhear."

We planned it that way, Daphne thought. But rather than speak, she just nodded.

Davenport addressed Tawayo, not the agents. "So if you believe a hex will work, and you perform it, aren't you just as guilty as if you pulled a trigger?"

"Then why did you come?" he asked. "You helped. You were there. You believed that what we were doing was necessary."

Davenport looked over at Daphne. Her eyes were medium-brown, flecked darker around the irises, very earnest under untweezed brows. "Norma was my ex," she said, straightening her spine. "I knew what she was doing to Beth and Beth's kids because I know what she did to me. And I was there when we hexed her, and it was me who got in touch with the priestess who

helped us. I did what I did because it was the best choice I had. But it was done in *sorrow*, David."

He snorted, but he didn't meet her eye. Daphne, however, caught Hafidha's. Hafidha stepped forward and said the first words she'd uttered since they entered. "Priestess?"

"Morgan Creirwy," Davenport said. "The writer. She's an awesome priestess, and she...helps...covens that need her. I know we raised power that night, the night we cursed Norma. I was exhausted afterwards."

"Morgan Creirwy," Daphne echoed, abruptly remembering the source of the quote about Hecate's justice. "Thank you, Ms. Davenport. Do you have a card? We'll probably want to ask some followup questions."

Silently, Davenport reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver card case. The card she extracted proclaimed her a lawyer for a local domestic violence shelter. Daphne, with a glance at her face, decided neither she nor Tawayo were likely to be a flight risk, especially since they were correct. They *hadn't* done anything illegal.

She gave them each her card in return, and brought Hafidha blinking out into the still-bright sun, which shone directly in their eyes when she opened the door.

"Why did we bail?" Hafidha asked. "I thought the interview was going well."

"Creirwy's the gamma," Daphne said. "I've read her work. I'll bet you a dill pickle from the good Jewish deli it's her." She halted just as the door clicked behind her. "Shit, I need to go back in and buy one of her books--"

"Don't bother," Hafidha said, striding ahead. "I'll get them off Amazon Search Inside."

"I need a signed one," Daphne said. "I'll be right back. But yeah, get the rest."

It took three minutes, during which not a single word was spoken, and Tawayo was obviously surprised when she whipped out her expense-account card and paid. Back at the SUV, Daphne clutched the crinkling paper bag to her chest.

"Crap," she said. "They recruited a contract murderer. A magical hit man. A gamma for hire."

"Harm none and do as thou wilt," Hafidha said, jingling the keys. "Come on. While you were away, the intertubes told me Ms. Welsh Goddess lives not too far from here."

Daphne scorched her fingers on the door handle when she reached for it. She tried again with her sleeve wrapped over her fingers and had better luck. "Ceridwen was the goddess," she said, swinging into the SUV. "Creirwy was her beautiful daughter."

"Because that's so much less presumptuous. Call Reyes. Tell him to meet us there."

Because it was only Daphne in the car, Hafidha didn't bother with her earpiece. Daphne knew she hadn't needed it for months, but in public it kept people from treating her like a schizophrenic.

Hafidha said, "El Jefe must be in a dead spot. It's going to voicemail. Let me try Spooky Mulder--"

The sun had dipped behind the horizon, but the sky was still soaked in light. Daphne didn't look up from skimming pages on Hafidha's laptop. Once-familiar words evoked vivid memories of sharp incense and the dry whir of cheap paper against her fingertips. Candelight, laughter, wine sipped from a passed cup. The first girl she'd ever kissed.

Somewhere, in a drawer, she still had her athame.

Creirwy's back-cover author photo showed a stern woman in her early thirties, nose and jawline precise as origami. Her blonde hair was parted in the center and draped forward over one shoulder, tied at intervals in a style that suggested Victorian paintings of Medieval subjects. She wore a wide, low v-neck and no jewelry to interrupt the pale skin it showed. Daphne was fairly sure it was the photo from the first of Creirwy's books she'd read.

She found a passage she remembered and read aloud. "'The so-called Threefold Law is patriarchal Gardnerian bullshit, meant to keep witches powerless and harmless. Our foremothers had no threefold law. They brought Hecate's justice down on those who deserved it. Let those who have

something to fear, fear *us*.' Yup. That sounds like the Morgan Creirwy I remember."

Across the console, Hafidha said, "Hey, Duke. We have a tentative ID on our gamma. Morgan Creirwy. She's on Highway 28, Dona Ana Road. Check your Crackberry when we're done. I forwarded the essentials. Yeah, she's a--oh, you know who she is?"

Daphne winced. Of course he did. He was Duke, after all.

There was a longish pause, and then Hafidha said, "Oh *really*."

Hafidha ended the call. "They were under six tons of paper at the Sufferin' Jesus Shoppe, but they're on the way. And get this: Duke says he met her, years ago. Says she's quote-unquote *the water-tower shooter type.* He also says she's done book signings there twice, and that: *Writers do book tours. Regional writers do regional book tours. And they do them to promote new books.*"

"...checking the publication dates against the strings of deaths now," Daphne said. A moment later she looked up. It felt portentous, and she tried to lighten her voice so she didn't sound like a bad melodrama when she said, "Confirmed."

*

Aside from an occasional glance at the GPS, Todd kept his eyes on the road. He was silent, his dismayed scowl smoothing out into the familiar thoughtful mask that gave away nothing.

Reyes waited. Finally Todd sighed and said, "If Lau's right, we can't catch this one alive, Steve."

Of all the people he worked with, Reyes meant least to yank Sol Todd's chain. But it was a reflex, one he wasn't proud of, and sometimes even when he did catch himself in time he couldn't resist it. "Can't?"

Todd licked his lips. "Won't. For safety's sake, *probably* shouldn't even try. And if we did catch her, we couldn't keep her. You think Bloody Larry is bad--"

Reyes kept his face turned toward the road unscrolling before them. He folded his hands around the paper cup of bad tea in his lap and said, "I've

been thinking about the implications for a while now, Sol. And don't forget, all we have is a hunch."

"S.W.A.G.," Todd said. "Scientific wild-ass guess. But it is scientific, and if you and Nikki came up with the same conclusion independently, I'm inclined to trust it. Which means, if you're right, that we have one hell of a monster on our hands."

Reyes lifted his teacup to shield his mouth. "Why do you think I made sure you came along for the ride?"

Todd didn't flinch, nor did his eyes narrow. He just nodded, and kept his attention on driving.

Act V

"According to her Wikipedia entry," Hafidha said, "Creirwy was repeatedly raped by her stepfather growing up. Who the hell puts that on the *internet*?"

"Primary crack," Daphne agreed. She was still skimming text on Hafidha's laptop, ignoring the fact that Hafidha was apparently checking Wikipedia without recourse to a machine. "There's a bunch of reasons to publicize a history of abuse, Hafs. Silence equals death, remember? There's no shame in being a victim."

"Ouch," Hafidha said. "I feel like I just got handed a C in Feminism 101. Okay, snark retracted. Secondary crack? I can't read while I pass this semi."

The lights flashing behind the grille at least made the semi pull over to rumble along the shoulder while they sailed past, half in the oncoming lane. Without looking up, Daphne waved thanks to the driver. He dimmed his lights behind them in acknowledgment. Polite drivers in this part of the world. "Death of her lover about eight years ago."

"Let me guess. Freak accident."

"Better," Daphne replied. "Killed in an SUV rollover in which Creirwy was also injured. Corporate malfeasance suit dismissed. I just found obituaries for the judge that heard the case *and* the owner of the dealership that sold the car. Freak--"

"--accidents." Hafidha slid back into the proper lane and slapped the blinker off. Windows bloomed open on the laptop screen. "Take a look at those satellite shots of Creirwy's house. Do you see what I see?"

The satellite photos showed an isolated L-shaped structure huddled behind a tatty windbreak of pines, a tumbledown shed alongside, a dusty compact car pulled up in the gravel driveway. Some acres seemed to be fenced, but the fence ran off the shot, and there was no sign of livestock.

"Yeah," Daphne said. "We're not going to be able to sneak up on her. We should coordinate with Todd and Reyes: they're going to come from the other side, and they could just drive in cross-country. Do you think David the not-a-Hopi is off the phone with her yet?"

"Tawayo? I think it's pretty safe to assume he warned her, yeah."

"So she's working on her hex right now."

Hafidha ducked down to look up under the edge of the roof, and Daphne wondered if she was judging the graying sky.

"We've got a lot of light left," Daphne said.

Hafidha grunted. It sounded like agreement. "We're about three minutes out." She steered the SUV to the side of the highway and put it in park. "A brief pause for investiture."

Daphne had already turned around to get their ballistic gear out of the back. Hafidha scooped her hair back into a scrunchie and accepted the blue nylon body armor, tendons showing in her wrist as she took the weight.

Wordlessly, Daphne also handed her a Snickers bar. Hafidha grinned and ripped it open with her teeth.

"Hafs," Daphne said, disconnecting her seatbelt so she could yank her own gear on more conveniently, "I need Creirwy's birth name. Can you get that for me?"

"Ten seconds ago," Hafidha said. "Poor kid. She was born Pamela Priscilla Pocatello. Parents, parents. Just say no to alliterative names. Seatbelt, Sis?"

"Seatbelt," Daphne said, sealing it with a click.

While Hafidha spoke softly to the air, informing Reyes and Todd of their ETA to coordinate the raid, Daphne rummaged in her bag for a pen. She ripped the signed title page out of the copy of *The Goddess of War* she'd purchased, wincing over mutilating a book, and tossed the bulk of its corpse between the seats.

Balancing the paper on her knee, she wrote her own name and Hafidha's above the title, then frowned and for good measure added *Dr. Stephen Reyes* and *Solomon Todd.* She drew a broad triple circle around the four names, taking care to join the ends, then dove into the back seat again, seeking the bag that held the remains of their fast-food second lunch. From under the burger wrappers, she retrieved two paper tubes of salt and tore one open. The scribbled page having been restructured into an improvised pocket, Daphne sprinkled salt into it and folded the whole thing closed. She sealed it with a band-aid from her bag.

On the outside she wrote *Morgan Creirwy* and *Pamela Priscilla Pocatello*.

"We're here," Hafidha said. "What are you doing?"

Daphne held up her hand. "Craft produces change in accordance with will. Hush, please."

Hafidha hushed. Daphne held up her crumpled, improvised ward and spoke to it. "Thrice around the circle round, ill fortune cannot pass this bound. Artemis, Athena, Hecate, I invoke thy protection. Triple Hecate, I invoke thy justice. Hecate, daughter of Asteria, I invoke thy grace. *So mote it be.*"

When she looked up, Hafidha was staring at her. "Woo-woo," she said.

"Hush," Daphne said again, and held up her ward. "It's *her* mythology."

Hafidha's phone said "This is bat country!" in Johnny Depp's voice. She answered it with a gesture. "Talk, Duke."

Whatever he said was brief. Hafidha looked across the car seat. "They're in position," she said.

Daphne nodded, and pulled Chaz's pendant out to swing and flash over her vest.

*

"She's not charging enough," Hafidha muttered as they closed in on the house. "Hit men can do better than this." The building was a good example of what UV did to aluminum siding. At least it wasn't a trailer. "How close do we have to get?"

Daphne held up the wad of paper. "She has to be able to see this."

"Not good. She's got a hell of a range."

"Only when she can tap into other people. Remember what Davenport said, about being exhausted afterwards?"

"We hope."

Daphne's mouth twisted. "Well, yeah. But remember the guy in Minnesota who was drawing the body heat out of his victims? Maybe she can leech calories."

"She thinks this works like magic. We think it works like the anomaly. If she's focusing on doing us dirt right now, she's not concentrating on any prearranged booby traps, right? But watch out for actual, physical, non-woo-woo ones."

Daphne shook her head. "Creirwy *believes*."

"So no 'Say your prayers, but keep your powder dry.'"

"Right. Speaking of which, the shooting part, if it comes to that, is mostly up to you." Daphne held up the paper packet again. "But since she'll *expect* shooting..."

"Try not to do it." Still, Hafidha felt better with her Glock in both hands and her shoulders against the siding to the left of Creirwy's front door.

Daphne took the right, reached across the frame, and knocked on the alligatored paint. "Morgan Creirwy. This is the FBI. We need to ask you some questions."

"All who intend no harm are welcome here." Creirwy's voice was harsh and rough. Hafidha had expected something plummy, like a television preacher; Creirwy sounded as if she'd swallowed a coarse-grade sanding disk. "It's open."

Daphne turned the knob, and Hafidha pushed the door open on the hinge side.

The space was meant to be a living room. But the rug had been rolled tight and shoved against the far wall, and the furniture piled on top of it. The vinyl mini-blinds were down and tilted shut on the wide window. Despite this, the room was full of wobbling yellowish light--from dozens of candles, in wall sconces, in dishes along the baseboards, on the stacked furniture, in a black iron chandelier in the middle of the ceiling.

The finish was worn off the hardwood floor, which must have made it easier to draw the white chalk circle on it. Eight black pillar candles, burning just inside the chalk, marked what Hafidha knew from a quick consultation with the GPS to be compass points.

The room glittered discreetly. She wondered for an instant about doped candle wax-- No. She was seeing glass jars, each nearly full of clear liquid and lidded, keeping the candles company.

Kerosene. Gasoline. Something smart people didn't keep near fire. *An accident waiting to happen.*

At the center of the circle a low table--maybe a stool--draped in black satin held an unlit black candle, a black-handled knife, and a litter of things Hafidha couldn't identify.

Behind the table Morgan Creirwy sat cross-legged, a box of blue-tip wooden kitchen matches in her lap.

Her hair was thin, the color of bleached winter grass. She wore a loose, wide-sleeved white robe of some shiny fabric; when it was made, it probably hadn't sagged around her shoulders and collarbones like that. At first sight, Hafidha thought her necklace was mostly shark's teeth, but no, those were moon phases, the full moon at the center, carved from something dark.

Neither the robe nor the necklace could distract anyone from the knotted scar tissue on the left side of her neck and chest. And the scars took a back seat to Creirwy's face, with its fierce, crazed stare. *Oh, yes, Duke. Water-tower shooter.*

Speak of the Devil--she saw Reyes, with Todd at his shoulder, framed in the passage to the kitchen on the other side of Creirwy's circle. Hafidha watched

them catalogue the room and come to the same conclusion she had, watched the blood go out of Todd's face so fast she expected him to fall over.

Hafidha felt her pistol grip slick in her palms. If she tried for a head shot, where would it go? Probability said, into Creirwy's overclocked, broken brain. But probability was Creirwy's friend right now, not theirs. A jar could break. A candle could topple.

The Mythbusters proved a hot slug won't blow up a tank of gas. I hope Creirwy watches Mythbusters.

Hafidha sidled left, away from the door, so Reyes and Todd would be out of her line of fire and vice versa. Todd stayed in her peripheral vision, rock steady, two eyes and a textbook stance and a gun. A sight picture and a finger on the trigger, and at that moment he might have been nothing but a machine constructed to contain those things.

Under the stacked furniture beside Hafidha, something scrabbled. Two round sequins reflecting the candlelight, a hiss: Creirwy had a cat. Well, of course.

"Morgan Creirwy," Reyes said quietly. Creirwy didn't start or look behind her. "We're investigating the deaths of twenty-seven people. We believe you caused them."

Creirwy snorted. "Justice Department. Department of *Homeland Security*. We make our own security. What government protected us during the Burning Times? Never again. He who raises his hand to us will be struck down." Her scraping, ruined voice sounded human as a synthesizer, echoing off the surfaces of the room.

"Because the Threefold Law is a lie, right?" Daphne took a step closer, armed with nothing but her piece of paper. Candlelight glossed the surface of her obsidian pendant.

Creirwy's eyes narrowed. *Nearsighted*, Hafidha realized. *Shit*. "Try to pass that line, and you're all dead. Do you know what a circle of protection is?"

"Yes," said Daphne. She took another step. "But you won't use it to hurt us."

"The hell I won't." Creirwy lifted her hands from her lap, struck the match in her fingers on the side of the box. Light flared, reflected off her chin, and sulfur and phosphorus shouldered the smell of candle wax aside. "Goddess, as I will, so--"

"Guess what Emily Davenport gave me?" said Daphne.

"Davenport..."

"You helped her get justice for what Norma Cassidy did. Now she's helping me do the same to you." Daphne sounded calm and sure. Hafidha wondered how fast her heart was beating under her vest.

Creirwy's match burned down to her fingertips. She dropped it and lit another, quick as a rattler striking. "She wouldn't hurt me."

"She gave me three hairs from your head. She gave me your signature. And she gave me your birth name."

"She doesn't know my name--"

"*Pamela Priscilla Pocatello*," Daphne said, her mouth shaping each syllable round and crisp. She took another step and held up her paper packet, showed Creirwy's names written across the band-aid seal. "We're warded against you. Whatever you send us will come straight back at you. You know it's true." Daphne was arm's length from the circle. "Give yourself up and come with us."

Everything happened at once.

Creirwy screamed, a noise like lightning splitting a tree, and thrust her match at the wick of the altar candle. The cat bolted from its hiding place under the furniture, headed for the open door. It scrabbled and slid on the hard floor, knocked one of the jars into the circle. Creirwy lunged to catch it. The glass shattered, and the contents pooled shining between the shards. Kerosene stink, gagging-sweet, filled the room.

Creirwy started back, blood rising in a cut across her palm, her wide sleeve dragging through the mess on the floor. She raised her hand to her face. Her sleeve hem brushed the altar candle.

The shiny synthetic fabric, dipped in kerosene--it might as well have been napalm. Creirwy was dressed in fire, and screaming.

"Shit, shit, shit," Daphne said and hurtled across the circle, shouldering past Reyes and Todd. Hafidha smacked her pistol into its holster. *God damn, no drapes, the rug is buried under crap, I don't even have a coat--* She lunged for the kitchen and just missed slamming into Daphne, bolting back into the

room dragging a bedspread like a train behind her. "Water," she gasped as she went by.

Todd was at the kitchen sink filling a stockpot. He shoved it at Hafidha and grabbed a plastic mixing bowl out of the drainer.

Hafidha ran to the living room, slopping water, and found Daphne and Reyes snugging the bedspread around Creirwy like a cocoon. Creirwy was still screaming, a breathless whistling shriek, steadily waning. Hafidha soaked as much of the cloth as she could and ran back for Todd's mixing bowl.

By the time she made it back, the fire was only steam and the stench of barbecue, and Daphne hunched over Creirwy while Reyes stood aside, holding scorched hands wide as if he hadn't realized he'd burned them. Creirwy moved weakly, her skin sliding off on Daphne's fingers as Daphne tried to press her hands away from her face. Establishing an airway.

Let her go, Daphs, Hafidha thought. *There's no way we can keep this one in a cage.*

But that wasn't the way it worked, and behind her Todd was already punching 911.

*

In the end, it didn't matter. The house was isolated, the response time over fifteen minutes, and the internet, through Hafidha, told them the only certified trauma center in the state of New Mexico was in Albuquerque, a hundred seventy-one miles away.

The former Priscilla Pocatello died in the air, fifty minutes later. Daphne got the news from Reyes, who had flown with her to the hospital, ten minutes after that.

She disconnected the call. Just a movement of her thumb, but it felt like drawing a sheet up over a face.

"She killed herself," Hafidha said, low-voiced but firm. "It was suicide. Like a bomber blowing himself up. She killed herself. That's all."

Daphne lifted her chin and tucked the phone into her pocket. She leaned back against Hafidha's hand on her shoulder, feeling each finger warm and perfect through her shirt. "So if you believe a hex will work, and you perform it, aren't you just as guilty as if you pulled a trigger?"

"You don't believe in hexes, Sis."

"I believe craft can produce change in accordance with will. That magic is about conviction and acting on that conviction. I used my craft--profiling or witchcraft or both--to kill. I take responsibility, Hafs. It's cool." She moved to tuck Chaz's pendant back inside her blouse, now that the armor was off, and thought better of it. It was pretty in the moonlight. Let it shine.

Hafidha squeezed Daphne's shoulder hard before she let it go.

*

On the Gulfstream, Daphne looked up from a copy of *The SUN* to find Todd sliding in across the table. He pushed a cup of coffee at her, then settled back with his own, staring out the window with a frown.

She recognized an opening when somebody gave it to her, so she took the coffee and sipped. Not as good as Chaz's, but hot and fresh. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything." She saw him trying to suppress the grin. It just wasn't working. "I can't promise to answer--"

She laughed. "Believably."

"Hey, what you do with the information is up to you."

"Uh-huh. When we first arrived, in the airport. Who did you call?"

"Oh." He blushed, shook his head. "It was personal."

"New girlfriend? Go you."

"No," he said. "I always call the same person."

A silence, which she didn't fill.

Given time, Todd did the work for her. "My dad."

"How come your dad?"

"Because my luck's going to run out sometime, and I don't see him very much anymore."

He glanced out the window again. Daphne thought about her own father, widowed--like Todd's--and already having lost a son. He didn't approve of her, of her life, of her choices and who she was.

And yet suddenly her fingers itched for her cell phone.

She was pulling it out when Todd said, "Thank you, Daphs."

"What for?"

He pushed his coffee mug back and forth with his fingertips. "I'm not just Paper Trail Guy, you know."

"I know." She made a face. "Is it presumptuous to say I'm okay that it didn't have to be you or Hafs, this time?"

"It's not presumptuous."

She looked down at her hands. "Does it ever get easy?"

He shrugged. "Depends on if you're the kind of person those sorts of things get easy for." He stood up, collecting his coffee cup, and started to turn away. "Go ahead and make that call before we're on the runway."

She pulled out the phone, but her thumb hovered over the pad. She put it on the table in front of her and looked up. He was still standing there. She wanted something from him, his benediction, his acceptance into a terrible brotherhood. Something. Something maybe she'd wanted from her father, too, but she had a better chance of getting it from Todd.

"Am I that sort of person, Sol?"

He didn't speak, at first. But when she settled back in the chair, arms folded across her chest, he shook his head and looked her in the eye. "No. For you, it's never going to get easy."

When he left, she picked up the phone.

Transcript

Washington, D.C. June 2008

DATE: 06/26/08
CLINICIAN: Dr. Kay Baylor
CLIENT: 129799
DOB: 08/26/1971
PURPOSE OF SESSION: DOJ evaluation

Client referred by superior for evaluation on 06/20/08. Reported depressed affect, volatility, withdrawal. Medical history/health questionnaire collected and on file.

In initial observation, client is reserved, uncommunicative. Possibly uncomfortable in clinical/therapeutic setting.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW:

KB: I would like your permission to record this session, so I can transcribe it later. Though my evaluation will be based on our conversation, nothing you say will be repeated to anyone. The transcript will be kept private, and the tape will be destroyed after the transcription is done. Do I have your permission?

(Client nods.)

KB: I'm sorry. I need you to give or withhold permission out loud.

Client: Yes.

KB: Thank you. Let's talk about why you're here.

Client: My boss told me to come.

KB: And your personal goals for this session?

Client: I'd like him not to send me again.

KB: We'll work toward that. Why do you think your superior requested this evaluation?

Client: (offers cellphone) Number three on speed dial. You can ask him.

KB: Then I'd know why *he* thinks he sent you here. Why do *you*?

Client: (puts phone away, folds arms over chest, leans back in chair. Appears to consider before answering.) Because he thinks I'm acting weird?

KB: Are you?

Client: If I thought so, I'd stop.

KB: But you believe Agent Reyes disagrees.

Client: Between you and me? Reyes isn't the first person I'd go to for a judgment on "normal."

KB: Why so?

Client: Do you know him?

KB: I've met him.

(Client does not continue. Body language still closed; expression challenging.)

KB: Agent Reyes's level of emotional detachment passes professional and approaches pathological. Have you observed other characteristics that make you doubt his judgment of your behavior?

Client: No. No, that's-- It sounds even worse when you say it. Mind if I borrow that line?

KB: If you plan to use it on Agent Reyes, I should warn you, it won't come as news to him.

Client: (laughs) I bet not. No, I just want to impress my teammates.

KB: Then be my guest. I understand one of the agents on your team was severely injured last month.

Client (after several seconds of silence): Yeah.

KB: That's a rare occurrence, isn't it?

Client: It's not-- We know it can happen. We see horrible shit all the time. It's a dangerous job.

KB: So what happened at the end of May was routine?

Client: No.

KB: You were a police officer before joining the Bureau.

Client: Yeah.

KB: Were you involved then in circumstances in which an officer was hurt?

Client: If you're sneaking up on suggesting that "Officer down" is a cop's least favorite ten-code, yeah, it is.

KB: How did you feel when it happened?

Client: You don't feel when it happens. You just *do*. You have opinions later.

(Client looks out window.)

KB: How do you feel right now?

Client: Fine.

KB: You're with the Behavioral Analysis Unit.

Client: Are you saying that "fine" is not enough to go on?

KB: I was hoping for a little more than that. Yes.

Client: Look, I know this scene. I've *directed* it. Quit trying to find the back door into my head and ask for what the hell you want.

KB: All right. Why haven't you visited the agent who's hospitalized?

(Client seems startled, and doesn't immediately reply.)

Client: I have.

KB: Once, according to the record at the nurses' desk. On the morning of June 3. But not since.

Client: Hospitals creep me out.

KB: Did you tell that to Agent Reyes?

(Client doesn't reply.)

KB: Tell me about that visit to the hospital.

(Client looks down, then toward the door.)

Client: It wasn't... I wouldn't say "visit."

KB: Why not?

Client: It... He was out--sleeping, unconscious. He didn’t even know we were there.

KB: We?

Client: The team. He was delirious. We took shifts watching.

KB: You're overqualified for that, aren't you? A nurses' aid--

(Client jerks head, raises hand.)

Client: They wanted to restrain him. He was... That was what happened to him. He was...chained like a dog. Like a fucking dog. And starved. Then the son of a bitch took a knife to him--

(Client stops abruptly. Hands clench in lap, face averted. Anger. And...?)

Client: He looked helpless. Jesus, he looked as if he was never going to leave that fucking hospital bed. But we had to be there because he was still trying to get away. He'll be helpless when he's dead.

KB: You and your teammates rescued him.

Client: No. No, he did that. We just... Just brought him an ambulance. Just...

KB: Tell me what you're seeing.

Client: That front yard--maybe two dozen people there. And we're no fucking use. I cleared the house, but it didn't need doing. I wanted... Nobody needed anything I could do. He wasn't helpless. *We* were.

KB: You wanted to act.

Client: Fuck, yes. In my job, if you're not doing anything, you're *failing*. What the hell was standing there *watching* going to do for him?

KB: Even though there was nothing you could do.

Client: We were there to save his ass. We were supposed to help.

KB: So you feel your team didn't do its job.

Client: No. I don't feel that. No.

(Client is silent. Appears to be controlling strong emotion, but the nature of the emotion isn't clear.)

Client: All those people there. Three of them... Falkner caught him. He was falling, and she caught him. And Worth was right there. We didn't even know if it was safe, but she starts checking him over. And he... He took the son of a bitch out. Everything we were there for, what we all wanted to do--they did it.

KB: When you say "we," do you mean, "I?" "What I was there for?" "What I wanted to do?"

Client: I would... I would have traded places.

KB: Even with the injured agent?

Client: Yes.

KB: Why?

Client: I watch their backs. I let him down.

KB: He wasn't in the field.

Client: I know. But... I sat in that goddamn room. Even his breathing sounded like a fight. And I couldn't help.

KB: You felt the way you did that night.

Client: I didn't save him. Was I supposed to walk in there and look him in the eye and say, "Get well soon?"

KB: Do you think he blames you?

Client: I wish to hell he did. It would be easier.

Tether

Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore MD, June 2008

Chaz is watching the door when Daphne looks in. How had he known to watch? Oh, footsteps, of course. She'd bet he can recognize each of them by sound. There's a pattern to a person's gait, after all.

His chin is tucked; it makes him look wary, like a creature about to bolt from the room. But Chaz is human, so the instinct to run and hide when hurt is tethered to reason. As Chaz's body is tethered to monitors and machines.

"Hey," she says. For the first time in so many visits, it sounds empty and foolish.

But he smiles--not the big loopy Chaz smile she misses so much, but the tempered painkiller one. He doesn't speak as she comes to roost on the chair beside the bed, hands pressed flat against her thighs.

She almost asks, "How are you?" It's what she always starts with; it's what she comes for. Except...not this time. When she asks how he is, it's because she wants to know. She's not going to turn it into a way to stall for time. But without that question, her tongue sits in her mouth like a dry leaf.

Chaz clears his throat, a small, careful sound. He looks naked. A moment later she's shocked to realize it's because it's the first time she's seen him without the feeding tube since he got here. "Hafs called."

The relief swells her lungs and loosens muscles she didn't know were tight. She tips her head back and pinches her eyes shut to keep from crying. The tears creep into her nose instead and make her sniff.

"I don't know what to say," he croaks.

"I... Neither do I. I thought if--" Her hands rise as if of their own accord. "'Nothing to see here, move along' wouldn't be true. But I'm okay."

His chest rises, falls. He nods, careful as the throat-clearing. "I was scared. The whole time you guys were gone."

She can't remember ever hearing him admit to being scared. "Platypus--"

"If I'd been--been okay, it wouldn't have made you safer. But I kept thinking something would happen, and I wouldn't be there." Chaz's voice thins away to nothing, as if he wishes he hadn't told her.

She hunches forward, teetering on the very edge of the seat, to touch the ends of her fingers to his on the ugly chenille blanket. "You were right where we needed you most."

His eyelids drop; she realizes he's looking at their meeting hands. "You protected them."

She doesn't understand. She frowns, then realizes he doesn't see it. "I don't--"

"Everyone came home. Because of what you did. It might have been different." He stretches his arm an inch, winces--what did that cost him?--and clutches her fingertips. "Thanks."

They sit in silence. She doesn't move, though her arm howls for relief from reaching across the gap, until he falls asleep.

Going Over Home

Baltimore, MD / Arlington, VA, July 2008

Chaz planned to take a taxi home from the hospital; it would cost the earth, but he couldn't think of anything else to do. He knew he wouldn't be able to manage the train. When Daphne said, "When are they letting you go home? I can give you a ride," he was startled as much by the realization that that's how other people got home from the hospital as by the offer itself. He accepted.

He had twenty-four hours to regret it, and did. He'd be weak and in pain, and she'd see it.

But Daphne was exactly the right person. She was calm and quietly cheerful, helpful without hovering. She didn't ask him how he was. He had no idea why not, but under the circumstances, the action (not-action) was more important than the motivation.

She invented an excuse to go down to the nurse's station while he dressed. He could do it himself--if he couldn't, they wouldn't be letting him out--but he cursed the pigheaded optimism that had made him ask her for a t-shirt. He got it on, mostly because he had to.

His reward was in the bathroom mirror. He was washed-out, scrawny, pinched with pain and exertion, but he looked like him. Rotten, but him. *You're still here. It's easy after that.*

Yeah. He'd said it to Falkner: *Everything's changed.*

Daphne came back in with a wheelchair.

"I don't need that." Too harsh. *Don't jump down her throat. She wants to help.*

She blew her bangs out of her eyes and scowled. "Enough with the fish face, it wasn't my idea. They don't let people walk out of hospitals anymore."

No, they didn't. "We could steal an orderly's uniform, and I could push a laundry cart to the back door." He ought to apologize, but a joke was easier.

She jabbed with her chin toward the bed and smiled. "We may need a laundry cart for your stuff."

He'd piled everything on the bed, mostly so he couldn't crawl back into it. His laptop, a stack of DVDs, extra clothes, Dr. Srinivasan's nutrition plans, wound dressings, the Percocet from the hospital pharmacy, the purple stuffed coyote. (Where would he put it? Would Daphne mind if he gave it to Brandon, a thank-you for feeding the Angry Kitteh?). He'd dropped the get-well cards in the trash when he was alone; at home, they'd be a reminder of *not* being well. He'd kept the origami animals, maybe to prove that he hadn't dreamed that visit from Frost.

The autopsy report was folded inside a sweater, and the sweater stacked with a pair of sweatpants. The jeans he'd worn...that he'd put on the last time he was in his apartment, he'd parted company with in the emergency room in Texas. He hoped somebody'd burned them.

"No sweat," Daphne said, and he realized she'd read his long look as worry. "Sort out what you need for tonight. I'll deliver the rest tomorrow." She handed him a drawstring plastic bag printed with the Johns Hopkins logo.

Because otherwise he'd have to carry everything up the stairs. She knew he couldn't do that. Was it better or worse that she knew? "Thank you," he croaked.

She nodded without looking at him. Looking would mean there was something different, wrong. That he might need something.

Daphne knew he hated to need.

*

Daphne's car had sheepskin seat covers; he could lean back as long as he was careful. The worst discomfort was the butt of his pistol poking him in the ribs when he sat.

She told him scraps of news about work, about the gym. He let it wash over. Her voice was comforting, and he didn't want to think too hard about whether he would ever fit in the Chaz-shaped spaces he filled--used to fill.

But he noticed when she drove past the GW Parkway. "You missed the exit!" His voice rang sharp and too loud in the little space. His breathing sped up, his heart fluttered.

This time Daphne did glance over. "Construction. They've closed your ramp."

Detour. Nothing you can't go around. But his heart kept pounding; something frighteningly like a sob stuck in his throat. He dug his left hand into the sheepskin, hidden beneath his thigh.

She parked illegally in front of the door of his building. Her hands dropped off the steering wheel into her lap. "Platypus... You know you can talk to me, or to Wabbit."

"I just want to get home." Like a slammed door. He saw her flinch. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* She'd driven him all the way from Baltimore, she was there to help, she'd saved his goddamn *life*. He was a lousy human being.

He worked the passenger side latch with his left hand. Reach, pull, push. They all set off the deep ache in the healing muscle. "I suck, man. I'm sorry. I'm tired, I guess."

She nodded. "Want help with anything?"

"No, thanks. I think--just hand me the bag and I'll be all right."

Daphne reached (he watched her turn and stretch and felt a jab of envy--such a simple thing, done so easily) and plucked the bag out of the back. Chaz turned sideways, stiffly, and got both feet on the ground before he levered himself off the passenger seat. He didn't teeter. *Hah--nailed the dismount.* Daphne handed the bag out after him. It weighed six pounds, two ounces. The pull across his shoulders was a dull burn.

"You're sure you'll be okay on your own? I can come up and hang out for a bit, just in case."

Deep breath. Smile. It's what she needs to see. "Thanks, Daph. I've got it."

She wasn't happy, he could tell. But there wasn't anything she could do about it.

"I'll call you tomorrow, before I bring this stuff over."

"Sure." He let her drive off before he dealt with the weight of the front door.

The stairs were work. He had to stop and sit down on the landings to get his breath. It was like a preview of life at 80. No, unlike 80, this wouldn't last.

This he could recover from.

He fished his keys out of his pocket. Familiar action, so familiar it was stored in his muscles more than his mind. Made strange by...five weeks away. Lucky he hadn't left anything volatile in the refrigerator.

He rested his forehead against the door, caught his breath again. Inside were his books, the ones he hadn't read yet, and the few he kept for what they were, rather than for what they contained. His kitchen, stocked with non-perishable food, because even in Arlington the power could go out. His closet and chest of drawers, full of clean, comfortable clothes. His bed, quiet and safe and unvisited by medical professionals. Home. His life, ready to walk back into. It would be all right. He unlocked the deadbolt and pushed the door open.

Stale, stifling air hit him.

He lunged backward, staggered when his heels caught the hall runner. His heart pumped at full stretch, his lungs worked and worked, useless. The hallway tilted and circled. He sagged to his knees on the carpet and got his head low. The scar tissue on his back pulled like hell, but that was better than being found passed out in the hall. Sweat tickled his forehead, his chest, under his arms.

The air had breathed out of the house in Texas hot and stale like that. Just like that. The Relative had waited, breathing that air, until what he wanted came through the door.

No. That door was ash. This one had safety behind it. Correlation does not equal causation. *I won't let you take this away, too.*

He pushed up from the floor, pulled himself up the doorframe. He swept the bag over the threshold with his foot, followed it, and threw the lock behind him.

Everything was as he'd left it, where he'd left it. Everything in the room had its story written in his memory. Everything was familiar.

The man who'd lived here was gone. The only stranger in the room was him.

Still, he was alone. He was safe.

He drew his gun and cleared every room, every closet, every corner, by the book.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jul. 7th, 2008 – Jul. 11th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

[private] Also, I can kill you with my brain.

- Jul. 7th, 2008 at 4:52 PM

All right, self. We're writing this down so that we can look at it in two weeks and see that Daphne's right, and we don't feel as lousy. And then we can delete it, and it'll be like we never wrote it down.

Sure, self. That sounds like a really good idea.

Physical therapy with Mark, three days a week supervised, and then every day on my own.
Massage therapy with Amy, two days a week.

Honestly? It's a tossup which sucks more.

Amy also wants me to do yoga or tai chi. How the fuck am I supposed to do *yoga?* Maybe I can do geriatric chair yoga.

The good news is that Amy got my left arm, which is the worse one (that's the one I dislocated, in addition to fucking up the muscles) up to shoulder

height, though I thought I was going to puke. Or cry. Or cry so hard I puked.

Well, really, I always feel like that right now.

But that will stop when the AZT stops, right? No more puking after Saturday.

Anyway, this was with extra crying and puking. Or wanting to cry and puke.

I also kind of wished I could set her on fire with the power of my mind, but that trick never works. Crap, Cowboy, don't even joke about that.

I have no idea how I'm going to get through this.

Except in two weeks I'm going to look back on this post and go, "Gee, Daphne was right." And in four weeks the cast comes off, if my wrist is enough better.

Right?

Right.

Come on, kid. Cowboy up.

- Current Mood: determined
- Current Music:Calexico - Deep Down

July 10th, 2008

Impromptu cupboard comfort food!

- Jul. 10th, 2008 at 5:29 PM

What I wanted was caramel rolls, but the bread robot ones require you to know you're going to want them a little ahead of time. And I was too lazy to go foraging for them out in the wide world. So I made butterscotch biscuits.

I preheated the oven: 400 degrees. I combined two cups of flour, a tablespoon of baking powder, one teaspoon of salt, four teaspoons of sugar, and about three-quarters--say, a scant teaspoon--of cinnamon in a big bowl. Then I used my pastry cutter (which doesn't cut pastry; it cuts semi-solid fats into the dry ingredients for pastry) to mix a quarter cup of butter into the dry stuff until the bits of butter were about the size of teeny rice grains. (I was worried that part could be a little physical, but cutting in the fat is more about patience than oomph, so not a problem.)

Then I hauled out the remains of a bag of butterscotch chips I had left over from melting some on the top of something. Probably about a quarter cup of chips in the bag; I tossed them in the bowl. Chopped pecans would have been nice to add, but I didn't have any.

I poured in three-quarters of a cup of milk and stirred just 'til blended. (Remember about the baking powder? Don't overmix baking powder...) (Which means that, even though this dough is a bit stiff, it wasn't too tough to mix it with a spoon.) (Maybe I should find a stand mixer. Except I have no place to put it.)

I plopped the dough, evenly divided, into greased muffin pans. (It filled ten of the cups.) Pans in the oven, bake for twelve to fifteen minutes, or until the highest parts of each lump of dough are browned. Turn them out on a cooling rack. Split and eat with butter. Or, if you're feeling really self-indulgent, butter and cinnamon sugar. Or cinnamon honey butter (which I didn't have, but I wish I did).

Necessity is the mother of dessert.

- Current Mood: satisfied
- Current Music:Smithereens - Downbound Train

Tags:

- recipes

July 11th, 2008

[private] July 11, 2008

Jul. 11th, 2008 at 5:25 PM

Okay, that was overdoing it. Definitely fun parts, but outnumbered by the ones in which there were too many people too close, too much input. And I wore out fast. Not just physically (though, yeah, *no* endurance; even standing in line was tough), but mentally, too. I was trying so hard to seem almost-back-to-normal and not-a-source-of-worry, and it wore the batteries down like whoa.

So I sucked at PT this morning, because I was exhausted and underslept and hurting. Also angry and depressed because I felt picked on by the mean ol' universe that can't even let a guy go out to a midnight movie without kicking him for it. (I got surly at Mark. Not his fault.)

But damn it, I wanted to do one thing I would have done before--hang with the gang, get a beer, go to a movie, stay up late. Something I didn't use to think twice about. It was stupid, and I shouldn't have tried to do it yet, but I really really wanted to.

When I was in the hospital, I thought, "When I get off the NG tube, things will go back to normal." Then it was, "When I get home, things will go back to normal." Now it's, "When I get off the AZT," "When the cast comes off."

Things are definitely not back to normal. I'm scared they'll never get there. Normal seems like a million miles from here.

Maybe I'm defining "normal" wrong. I keep thinking normal will be when it seems as if it never happened. I need a new normal.

Current Mood: disappointed

Current Music:Vienna Teng - The Tower

Hellboy, part II, not really spoilers.

- Jul. 11th, 2008 at 9:16 PM

The first one was better, but at least this was pretty. T is turning me into a feminist. As we were walking out of the movie I looked at her and said, "So the only agency women can have is committing suicide or getting knocked up?" and Duke rolled his eyes at me and said "Who taught *him* the critical terminology?"

T. threatened to dock his grade for harrassing the other students, though, so it was okay. She is all about the abuse of power.

PT today. Which means bed soon.

Current Mood: lethargic

Current Music:John Wesley Harding - Ashes To Ashes

[private] Things to be thankful for.

Jul. 11th, 2008 at 9:38 PM

1) I just gacked down the last dose of Zidovudine I will ever, please universe, have to swallow.
2) Angry Kitteh sighting. She hissed at me from the railing when I came home from the movie last night. I think she might have been inside the apartment, and my key in the lock scared her out.

Current Mood: not fucking dead yet

Current Music:Sinead Quinn - What You Need Is...

Tags:

gratitude

Lability

Arlington, VA, July 2008

He could make breakfast for dinner. It was easy. He always liked breakfast, and the smell of potatoes and onions frying was guaranteed to make him hungry. Not even AZT-induced queasiness could hold out against that.

He juggled three red potatoes out of the fridge crisper bin. Red potatoes didn't take much scrubbing with the vegetable brush. He could use the wooden spoon, pinched in his right hand, to hold each one steady against the side of the sink, and scuff gently with the brush in his left. That kept his cast clean and dry. He did it without moving anything above his biceps, and only had to stop to rest once.

Just like a bouldering problem. You looked it over, decided what needed to be done when, then did it. He felt absurdly pleased at having washed three potatoes.

He reached across the counter (*ow*) for the cutting board. Then he opened the drawer and pulled a knife out of the rack.

A chef's knife, with his long, bony fingers around the handle.

It clattered to the countertop.

He clung to the edge of the table, eyes closed, panting. He was as far from the counter as he could be and still stand in the kitchen. He couldn't remember getting there.

At least he hadn't dropped the thing on his foot. *Come on, you idiot. You have to eat. This is where food comes from. It's your own knife. It's just a tool. You can do this.*

He opened his eyes, gritted his teeth, and took the three steps back to the counter. He set the first potato on the cutting board and reached for the knife. *You can do this.*

Sweat itched on his face, flecked his t-shirt, slicked his palms. His heartbeat shook his body. His stomach heaved, and he swallowed and swallowed. His hand came down on the knife handle, but he was shaking too much to close his fingers. He stepped back from the counter.

The constriction in his throat shamed him. *Emotional lability is common in the aftermath of trauma*, he recited to himself. From the Latin *labi*, "to fall."

I fell, baby boy.

No. There was no falling involved. Nothing to be ashamed of. No one was watching.

You couldn't climb if you couldn't fall. And sometimes falling was something you *chose*. An exit.

He pushed the cutting board to the back of the counter, the knife wedged between it and the backsplash tiles like a dead spider swept out of sight.

It was all right. He'd get better. Until he did, there was no shame in takeout. Whatever he had to do, that's what he'd do.

He probably wouldn't have been able to lift the cast-iron frying pan out of the cupboard, anyway.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jul. 12th, 2008 – Jul. 14th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

How sharper than a serpent's tooth.

- Jul. 12th, 2008 at 8:40 PM

So yesterday, was the last day of the puking drugs.

I bought myself a knife.

If you're already spending more than two hundred dollars on something, it's silly not to pay for overnight shipping, right?

My new knife arrived today.

Current Mood: guilty

Current Music:Everlast - What It's Like

[Private] More goals.

- Jul. 12th, 2008 at 8:43 PM

I waffled for a long time between the knife I bought and the Shun Classic left-hander at, you know, slightly more than half the price. Okay, so I spent way more money than somebody on disability should probably be spending. But since the whole point is to spend so much damned money on the thing that I will *force* myself to use it, I bought the better one. Also, this one I can use in either hand. Dunno, maybe it will help.

I haven't actually been able to bring myself to open the box yet. Just looking at the pictures online and knowing I have one like it in the kitchen kind of makes me feel like putting my head between my knees. I made a deal with myself, though, which was that tomorrow we were going to open the box, and Monday we were going to actually touch the knife. Tuesday we will take it out of the box and put it in the drawer rack.

And so on.

Because a guy needs to be able to chop pecans when the spirit moves.

And this is part of normal too.

Current Mood: guilty

Current Music:Warren Zevon - My Shit's Fucked Up

Tags:

the new normal

July 13th, 2008

[private] more gratitude

Jul. 13th, 2008 at 10:00 AM

3) It's supposed to be in the 90s today. If I can manage to walk up the stairs with a lawn chair and I remember how to pick a lock, the Beach is open!!! At least until the thunderstorms roll in.

(There is nobody on the roof to see you take your shirt off, cowboy. And it's not like midlife skin cancer is a concern. Go make some vitamin D. Stop making excuses. You can do your PT out in the sun.)

4) while we're on the subject, silicon gel and pressure pad therapy seems to be working, and while I've got some hypertrophy (probably more on the right wrist, because of the cast, but we'll see when it comes off), no giant cauliflower keloids yet. Maybe no giant cauliflower keloids at all. Maybe someday soon I'll even be able to lift my arms high enough to change the damned dressings myself.

5) Cast comes off three weeks from Monday. !!!!

6) The PT *is* getting easier. And my range of motion is improving. Which means Mark will give me harder things to do on Monday. Harder things to do means getting stronger.

7) Scrambled eggs without puking.

And that's all the gratitude I got today.

Current Music:Matthew Good Band - A Single Explosion

Tags:

gratitude

I called Mom at home.

Jul. 13th, 2008 at 10:18 AM

She says I can come back on light duty starting Wednesday.

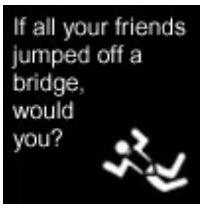
Which is good, because I'm going to start painting my toenails and eating the walls--or eating my toenails and painting the walls--if I don't have something to do here soon.

Current Music:Matthew Good Band - Suburbia

July 14th, 2008

[Private] Dammit

Jul. 14th, 2008 at 8:51 AM



It's just a tool, Chaz. You have to open the box before you can use the tool. This is where food comes from.

You cannot live on takeout and peanut butter forever.

Come on. Any damned fool who can jump off a perfectly good condo tower can pick up a goddamned kitchen knife. Really, son. You're disappointing me.

Current Mood: disappointed

Current Music:Dammit, dammit, dammit.

Tags:

the new normal

Therapy

Alexandria, VA, July 2008

Chaz lay on the massage table, blankets pulled up to his hairline, face pressed to the padded doughnut, and concentrated on regulating his heartbeat to distract himself from the awful nausea of the AZT. It was just a pattern, four chambers squeezing blood through like fingers squeezing milk from an udder with monotonous regularity.

It was a violent process, fraught with opportunities for failure. His heart was a strong and stubborn organ. It held on when the rest of him had quit, dragged all of them through even when the rest of his body, in desperation, was *eating* it. And here they were on the other side.

He was proud of it.

It was everything else he struggled with.

A tap bounced off the door. The next struggle was to stay calm, face-down, vulnerable. Soothe the heart when its rate wanted to spike. Keep the breathing even. Hard. It was hard.

He'd done hard things before. He could do this too.

"Come in," he said, hoping the awkward position hid the strain in his voice.

The door opened, and Amy entered.

He shouldn't find her threatening. She was a foot shorter than he, plump, strong, tendons showing across the backs of her hands. Her hair was dark blond, in ringlets. She wore eyeliner. She was vivacious, snub-nosed, sharp. Based on the pile on her desk, she was reading *Scientific American* and *The Kill Artist* this week. Two months ago, he would have found her sexy.

Now he just wished she'd go away and leave him alone.

It had to be done. This was the only way to get back some of what he lost in Texas.

He wanted it back. He was not letting the Relative take anything that he could find a way to defend.

"You warm enough, Chaz?" she asked. He'd asked her not to call him Doctor Villette. Not if she was going to be putting her hands on his naked back. Touching his scars.

No. Don't think about that.

"Dreamy," he said, and she laughed. It was true: the table was heated, and so was the electric blanket, and he was warm enough for the first time in ages. He breathed in, breathed out, trying to relax.

"I'm going to need your help for this," she said, laying one hand on the blanket over his shoulder. "If it hurts too much, let me know, okay? Tough is good, but we don't have to do this all today."

"Right," he mumbled. *How much can it possibly hurt?*

"Also, if you're triggering, let me know."

That made his breath catch in his throat, his palm curl against the edge of his cast. "Excuse me?"

"Many people experience an emotional release during massage. You've suffered a tremendous physical insult. Your body will react. Don't be afraid of it."

Your body will react.

Nothing else she could have said would have calmed him that much. It's physical. It's medical. It's normal.

It will happen. Don't panic.

"I get weepy," she said. "Personally. Whenever anybody works on my neck. Just let me know if it happens, and let me know if you want to soldier on or if you need a moment, okay? It's all up to you."

Okay, there was something better she could have said. And that was it.

"I'm ready," he said, and tried to pretend he didn't know what she would see when she pulled the blanket down.

Her touch was assured, impersonal. Warm, her hands greasy with rosemary-scented oil. "I feel like I'm being oiled down for roasting," he said, which made her ask if he cooked, and they chattered about chicken recipes for ten minutes while she worked firmly across his lower back and pelvis, then up

the spine. Chicken recipes were fine, as long as he thought about the smell of rosemary, not of roasting meat.

The work she was doing hurt, a deep achy pressure he could feel with every shift of her hands, stretching all the way through abused muscles and fascia down the ligaments to the bone. "Ow."

"Too much?"

"No. Just ow."

"Yeah," she said. "I bet. Shoulders now."

He tensed, of course, and she must have felt it but she didn't say a word. And she seemed to take no notice of the scars, neither tracing nor avoiding them, though her fingers kneaded back and forth across them in the direction of the grain of his muscles.

"Right," she said. "Bad news and good news."

"Ready," he answered. He seemed to be getting taller; his eyes were held closed by the headrest now, as if his neck had lengthened.

"Bad news is, I don't think you're ever going to get all your strength back."

"Oh," he said.

She touched him lightly, in the small of the back, and he shivered. "Good news, I think you can get most of it. And the full range of motion."

"Oh," he said. "That's good, right?"

"Yes," she said. "Fair warning. This next bit is uncomfortable."

She wasn't kidding. She drew his left arm forward and down, supporting it off the table, and let it dangle. His knuckles brushed the floor and she laughed.

"Orangutan," he said.

"Tall," she said. "Try not to hold your breath. And go ahead and make noise. It really does hurt that much."

Her fingers glided into his underarm, dug deep, slid along the edge of his latissimus dorsi. He made a noise, short and unhappy, through his nose. "I know," she said, sympathetically, and did it again. "Breathe."

He tried. He got some of it, anyway, before the pain made his throat tighten.

"Good job," she said. "All done. Traps and rhomboids now. We're going to try to break up some of the adhesions. You may hear some weird noises, but if it works, the results are immediate."

"By which you mean?"

"You'll be able to reach stuff down off the top shelf tonight," she said, cheerily.

That promise was all that got him through it.

There were noises, all right. They sounded like somebody snapping bubble wrap. And felt like somebody ripping apart his back with a crochet hook. At one point she levered his scapula up and slid the side of her hand under it, pressing, questing. Something big gave, a thick elastic pop. He yelped.

"All done," she said. "With that side."

"Oh, God."

"I know," she answered. "You're doing great, though. Do you need a drink of water?"

"Not unless you plan to cut it with scotch."

She laughed. He almost jumped off the table when she patted his shoulder. But when she lifted his arm onto the table again it went smoothly, and he felt the muscles gliding freely under his skin. She moved the arm up to where it would have stalled before, and it rose past his shoulder. And then stopped. But that was eight inches of reach he hadn't had that morning. "Awesome," she said, tucking his arm under the blanket. "We'll get there."

Chaz pinched his eyes closed, hard. He could cry when he got home. It was a promise that had gotten him through more than one bad day already this week.

"Other side now," she said.

Chaz took a deep breath and thought, *Beat you again, you son of a bitch.*

Mythology

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., July 2008

"What about wendigoes?" Hafidha asked.

"Wendigoes?"

"Wendigoes. Eeeevil creepy spirits that possess poor mortals and give them a taste for the long pig." Hafidha wiggled her fingers across the air before Worth's face as she trailed across the office for another folder.

Worth brushed them off with a dog's resigned puff. The breath lifted the pages of the report perched on her chest. She propped herself up better on Hafidha's awful couch--sunflower velvet, and you couldn't get the woman to admit how she got it from whatever garage-sale hell through the narrow office halls and into this crabbed angle of a room, never mind past *security*--and scooped her carton of lo mein off the floor. Hafidha was clearly only happy in what resembled a server room. With a record sixteen stacks of files. And magazines. And an eye-killingly yellow couch.

"Twenty to one it's a mythology. Wendigoes are gammas," Hafidha continued, and shoved a handful of papers in the folder. And shoved the folder onto a pile stacked, altarwise, in front of a blown-up library poster of Stephen Hawking hugging a book. Hafidha didn't hold with filing cabinets. So they'd started sorting the work by the posters on the wall: The Steve for definitely non-anomalous, *The Truth is Out There* for maybes. Robert Smith's teased-up hair and badly-applied eyeliner for yes, the spider-man is having you for dinner tonight.

Robert Smith was, luckily, going hungry so far.

The thought made Daphne Worth, well...not.

"I wonder if they make soy long pig." Daphne poked at the noodles with one chopstick. Sniffed 'em. She wasn't hungry anymore, not really, but admitting that in Shadowland was tantamount to suicide by swarming. And after two days on Hafidha's improbable couch sifting every cold missing persons case north Washington State'd spit out in the last fifteen years, she didn't much feel like talking mythologies either.

"Wendigo Gamma scorns your soy product." Hafidha scooped up another stack of photocopies. "Wendigo Gamma scorns those who cannot use a scanner."

"You're saying wendigoes are gammas." The noodles hung limp off her chopstick. They didn't smell like food anymore. *That*, she reminded herself, *is when you stop eating.*

"I'm saying wendigoes are gammas who *think* they're wendigoes."

"It already exists, you know." Solomon Todd came through the doorway of the office nose-first, peeking into the room as if to declare it clear. "Wendigo Psychosis. A culture-bound disorder wherein members of Native American communities get themselves a yen for human flesh. Like the vanishing penis meme, except they usually kill themselves because they're so scared of turning into cannibals. Come to think of it, I knew a guy back in California, half Comanche Indian, never ate at the table with the rest of us..."

"No you didn't," Worth said, and lifted up a snarl of noodles dubiously.

"I'm hurt," Todd said, and dumped a whole new stack of files on the edge of Hafidha's desk. His shirt was dented, accordionlike, where they'd balanced against his chest.

Maybe he had. Maybe he hadn't and didn't remember the difference anymore, 'cause he'd told it so many times.

Either way, the files were real.

Daphne groaned.

"Want these?" she held out the takeout carton by way of a small apology. "Guaranteed only ethically-made organic soy long pig."

"I want them," Hafidha said. Todd folded the noodle box into one hand before she could make it across the room.

"Flesh," he remarked, and poked through the leftovers. "Pigflesh. Grave sin in many cultures."

"Duke," Hafidha said, "what're you doing in my office besides stealing my noodles?"

Daphne would not have thought it possible for Solomon Todd to appear yet more injured. "I am bringing you these reports from Down the Hall. As this is my workplace. And I, you know," he said loftily, "work."

Daphne snorted.

"We too partake of this thing called work," Hafs said, and spun once on her chair. "Bring us your mountainous paperwork, your tired, your poor."

"Tired and poor come first," Todd pointed out.

"Get out," Hafidha said, and threw a Nerf dart at his head.

"Oh my feet," Duke called ironically over his shoulder as he fled. "My burning feet of fire."

"So. Wendigoes." Hafidha said. "And rakshasa, who live out in the woods and eat each other. And chupacabra, drinking raw sheep. People kicked out of society for going funny who lurk in the weird wild woods and eat whatever comes along with two legs and a heartbeat."

"Gammas," Worth said. Tried to focus on the reporting officer's handwriting from a case seventeen years in the freezer. Failed.

"Pre-information age gammas. I bet you."

"But those are all--"

"Mythology," Hafidha finished, and grinned. "Cultural explanations for observable phenomena. I'm just sayin'." She twirled again, two rotations this time. "Five sneakered feet off the coast of Vancouver."

Worth propped herself up, hair flopping in her eyes. "You don't really think this is ours--"

"Nah," Hafidha said. "Dad's got us on a goose chase. Looks all wrong." She squiggled her fingers in the air again, this time making patterns, kaleidoscopes of what the Anomaly must look like to her in red and purple and green. Worth glanced over at the wallpaper of flatscreens: all of them blank with powersave, off so long they'd gone right past the screensavers.

She doesn't even look at the computer anymore, Worth realized, and held down a little shudder.

No. Bad alpha. Betas were the good guys.

"Besides, not our jurisdiction," Hafidha finished, a little too bright. "Can't do much about it if it is."

The computer fans hummed. Not too loud. Powersave.

"Not ready to get back in the field yet?" Worth asked quiet.

"No," Hafidha admitted, and the cheer and sparkle were sucked right the hell out of her voice.

"Me neither," she said, both honest and bolstering, hand to hold and the flat bald truth. Only one case since that burning Texas farmhouse, clouding up the early summer sky with smoke and stink and bad, and if they didn't get another for two more months it'd be too soon.

As if the memory of smell was a summoning, Chaz Villette set a three-tapping knock on the office door.

"Platypus!" Hafidha said, arms wide open and that easy bright cheer turned right back on.

Chaz looked between the two of them. Cautious. Smelling something off; smelling smoke. "Hey," he said, tentative. Picked at that tatty beat-up cast in a way that made Worth want to slap his hand off it. "Mom sent me to help with the Washington State files."

Read your mind, she thought before thinking, and then: *down, girl. For serious.* Whatever the hell had got up her nose today, it wasn't something the Platypus needed laid on him in his first week back at the office. In his first week of normal life after...that.

That.

And the curling-up quiet after, and the odd hours, and the reserve.

"Deliver us," Hafidha said, throwing her hands up in the air, and cleared a space for him amongst the files, the old cannibalized CPUs, the half-empty Chinese takeout and the knickknacks and pens.

Gammas were the bad guys. Betas were good.

It was dangerous to get caught up in your own mythology.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jul. 16th, 2008 – Jul. 19th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Survived!

- Jul. 16th, 2008 at 11:51 AM

First day back. Well, half-day.

And now I get to go eat and then to PT and then home to camp out on the Beach with a book while it's still warm.

Summer is good. We like summer.

Current Mood: exhausted

Current Music:Jonathan Coulton - Skullcrusher Mountain

Just in case anyone was wondering...

- Jul. 16th, 2008 at 1:36 PM

...I would have crawled nekkid over broken glass to have two adopted moms. Or two adopted dads.

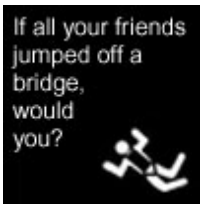
It's easier to say stuff like that when you don't know what you're talking about, Senator.

Current Mood: three guesses.

July 17th, 2008

Always a bridesmaid, never a bride?

- Jul. 17th, 2008 at 12:36 AM



Jealous, a little.

And yet.... *dude*. I get to be my best girl's best man. Well. All *right*

Also, Senator McCain? Bite me.

No, harder.

Asswipe.

Current Location:ECR

Current Mood: ecstatic (and a little bit envious)

Current Music:Shriekback - Speed Of Clocks

[Private] still more *&%&^% gratitude

- Jul. 17th, 2008 at 9:36 AM

Second day back at work. Let's see if I can do this one without any panic attacks.

Harpy's right. I do feel a little better, physically. Or, no, that's not right. I still feel awful. But I can do more while feeling awful.

Interesting how fast you get used to not being in an office for hours on end. This stuff really isn't natural, yo. I'll adapt, though, and pretty soon I will be able to do eight, ten, fifteen hours standing on my head.

Okay, not literally standing on my head. That's still beyond my limited abilities.

Still working through how I feel about Daphs and T. getting married. Judging by the cowboy's face when the Harpy broke the news this morning, I wasn't the only one with a complicated response. But he cowboyed up, because he does. Poor Cowboy.

Still, you go on, right?

The knife is still sitting in its box on the counter in the teeny kitchen, though I did open the box. Small victories. Of course, now I'm avoiding going in there where I might see it. Gotta do something about that tonight.

And Duke brought in an apple pie for breakfast (okay, two: one for me and Hafs and one for everybody else), and the news that he's going to San Diego for Liz's wedding in August. Liz's wedding =/= Duke's wedding, however. He seems surprisingly okay with it, and apparently this has been building for for a while. He was rather crestfallen that Harpy showed up with a better story (Harpy FTW!), because you could kind of tell he was luring us down the garden path with the saga of Liz's ex-boyfriend from Ireland who came all

the way to America for her, and who could turn that down?

I wonder if it's true.

So if there's some kind of wedding contagion in the air, it's not directly WTF-related.

I wonder if there's anybody in the world who would follow me all the way to another country.

Dammit, be happy for her. It's not that hard. And it's not like she doesn't deserve it. Don't be a shitty friend. What's the thing the Cowboy says? "Think of what an asshole would do, and do something else?"

Yeah.

Massage therapy today, which has in its favor that it's better than PT. Nice day today too. I wonder if I feel up to a walk down to the Puerto Rican place for dinner. Haven't been there since Amarilis, but I'm unlikely to run into her on a Thursday night, and I kind of miss it.

And after dinner, train time. It has to be tonight, because Daphs and T. are having people over Friday.

I wonder where I'll wind up, what I'll learn that I wish I hadn't, tonight?

All right, kid, stop moping. Everybody else cowboys up. You can too. A death spiral is nobody's friend, and these files aren't going to scan themselves.

Current Mood: grateful, dammit

Current Music:Fiona Apple - Extraordinary Machine

Tags:

the new normal

July 18th, 2008

[Private] And now I have to go put my shoes on to go out again.

- Jul. 18th, 2008 at 4:44 PM

PTSD (6,522)
Coyote (1)

The knife is in the drawer. Damn it.

Yeah, I know. It doesn't seem like much. Hell, it isn't much.

But it's something.

Current Mood: thankful

July 19th, 2008

[Private] Much straw. Short night. Not enough gold.

- Jul. 19th, 2008 at 2:57 PM

I've got to get better faster. It's that or starve or go broke. I'm spending too much on food because I can't do as much cooking (yet! Think positive!) as I used to. So by the end of the week I'm eating takeout, or buying ready-to-eat stuff, because by dinnertime I'm too worn out to start anything from scratch.

Today I got two batches of bread, a batch of rice, and a pot of bean soup made, more or less to my standards. But I have to buy too much stuff partially prepared, which costs Way More than the same stuff if I do the same things to it. So I have to get better.

But hey, I am. Counted to five today, holding the thing. Five seconds, no cheating. Didn't even close my eyes. (Be honest--you were afraid to.)

Last night was weird. I sort of didn't know what to do with my hands. Or feet. Is being uncomfortable with the gang part of the new normal? That would suck intensely.

Oh, quit whining. You could be starving in Darfur. You've got it easy.

Current Mood: hungry

Current Music:Stan Ridgway - Down the Coast Highway

Tags:

the new normal

Mirror Writing

Greater Washington D. C. area, July 2008

Children. Maybe start with children?

Because they're safest; they're full of imaginary friends and imaginary happenings, and nobody believes half of what they say. Grab the Snickers bars, stuff your backpack--crinkle of wrappers under your fingers like mylar or something. Where's the closest safest playground? Will there be any kids out on a gray misty day?

--No. Not such a good idea after all. Not because you might get mistaken for a pedophile. You don't need to talk to any of them. Just get close enough to see them, meet their eyes. Catch their reflections.

No, children are a bad idea because you could learn things. You *will* learn things. Things you have no excuse for knowing. That you would have to do something about.

That last Snickers bar stares at you from on top of the pile, and you pull it back out of the bag and peel the wrapper down. While you eat it--methodically, slowly, trying not to taste it so it won't make you gag--you try to come up with a better solution. Not kids. Okay.

Crowds.

The metro's dangerous. That many people, and what if you flip? Cold sweat prickles across your neck when you think of all those heaving strangers. The tight, hot, rocking box of the train. How out of control you'll be. If you lose it there--

--you'll be one more crazy on a train. And trains are full of crazies. Anonymous crazies. Worst that could happen is a transit cop shoots you.

Okay then.

(The authorized strength of the Metro Transit Police Department--the only tri-jurisdictional police agency in the United States--comprises 420 sworn, 106 security special police, and 24 civilian personnel. Thank you, memory.)

Choose a ratty clay-stained hoodie sweatshirt, and be glad you picked a drizzly overcast evening for this experiment. Sunglasses. Lick chocolate off

your fingers, cloying-sick sweetness nauseating, just like everything else you try to swallow. Maybe you shouldn't bother with the food. Maybe you should just let the poison strength inside eat you up and be finished with it. There's still time. Maybe. Not too much more time. You're stronger, you'll keep getting stronger. You're recovering faster than anything human could.

Off duty weapon in the fanny pack holster under the hem of the hoodie--that's a way out, too, if you need it. And better to do it yourself if that's what needs to be done. Save somebody else the terrible decision. If Eddie could manage... if Melinda...

Don't think about that now, cowboy. Think about getting this thing under control so you don't flicker in and out like a dying CRT whenever something scares you. So you don't bring up the mirror by reflex every time you're startled. Vanishing, you can practice that at home, in the john, clinging with both hands to the sink in front of the mirror.

Just thinking of the mirror starts up the nausea drool again. So don't think about it.

The thing you can't practice at home is reflecting other people. Other people's worst secrets. That part, you have to get hold of. Because you're going back to work, sooner or later. And when you go back, if you start talking like Daphne's dead mother, her dead partners, the first time she pushes your buttons, the jig is going to be up pretty damned fast, boy.

Door, then. Lock it behind you. Check the dead bolt. Your arms are working better, so you can reach back to rattle the handle while already turning away. The stairs aren't as bad, either. Not great, and you take them clinging to the banister, but *better*. If better is what you can get, you'll take it. Today.

Because Daphne is right, and you're going to get well.

So down the stairs, out the door. Flip the hood up against a light rain. Walk--trudge to the Metro station, and catch a train, any train. Transfer at random, then again, until you're going where you never go. It's not too crowded. Crunch yourself into the corner beside the door, hide the part of your face the sunglasses and hood don't cover behind a book. Thank god for the digital era--if anybody notices you muttering to yourself, they'll just assume you're on the phone.

You feel like a predator, lurking, watching, selecting prey. No. Predators cull the herd. Pick one that *isn't* weak. If something goes wrong, if someone gets hurt, it won't be one of them.

There: a big man, darker than Reyes, about your age. Square, heavy, acne-scarred face, narrowed eyes cutting holes in the glass of the car windows. Shaved head, navy blue knit watch cap, nylon Chicago Bulls jacket. His arms are folded across his chest. He looks as if he could stop an oncoming truck if he planted his feet.

Watch him, and wait. Riders leave the car at each stop, but he never moves, except to let the motion of the train rock him in his seat. At last it's just you and him at the end of the car.

So you raise the mirror.

Nissa, he whispers with your mouth. *Honey. Hang on. Hang on, baby. You'll be okay. Just stay with Daddy, okay? Baby girl, please, baby girl,* please...

His tears burn down your face from under the sunglasses. Or are they yours?

Don't die. Please, just don't--

Stop it, stop it. Cut it off. But mirrors reflect. It's their nature. They don't turn off. They break...

No. Fold it closed, like the book warping under your clenching fingers. Crumple it up like a candy wrapper. Make it small and pack it away. The bright, hard, shining thing in your head reflects itself, then goes dark.

He stares across the car at you. Whatever he saw, he won't believe in half an hour. But he does now. When the train stops, he staggers up from his seat and out the doors. His nylon jacket hisses against itself as he lurches past. You slump against the window, cold with sweat. So nauseated you don't care that you're hungry.

To the predator, they're all weak. It's just a question of degree.

It's all right. You'll learn. You'll bounce their pain and fear off the bright unbreakable glass inside you and never feel a bit of it. That's how it should work. How it will work.

The doors knife across your view of Nissa's daddy, shutting him behind reflections. The train jumps forward as if something giant kicked it into motion. Nissa's daddy doesn't see you; he's stomping toward the exit, fists shoved into pockets, the kind of guy you don't stop to ask the time. But before the station rolls out of sight, you lift your left hand, point your finger, and write your name perfectly, backwards on the glass: *Charles Travis Villette.*

You draw your feet up onto the empty bench, hug your bony knees, let the backpack dangle from its strap.

It won't always be this hard.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jul. 21st, 2008 – Aug. 27th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

It even looks like my kitchen...

- Jul. 21st, 2008 at 9:10 AM

Hey! What's this?

First full week back at work started eight minutes ago. We'll see how this goes, and if Mom lets me come back after my PT.

Current Mood: amused

Current Music:Emmylou Harris - Spanish Johnny (With Waylon Jennings)

July 22nd, 2008

New England boiled dinner, redux.

Jul. 22nd, 2008 at 9:31 AM

I've been working on figuring out some more crockpot stuff I can put on in the morning and leave to simmer while I'm away at work, and New England boiled dinner seemed like an obvious thing.

So. You get a big piece of corned beef brisket--4-5 pounds--take it out of the package, rinse it off, and put it in your crockpot. If you can get good corned beef from a butcher or specialty grocery that's better, but the stuff from the grocery store will work.

Cover the corned beef with cold water, and add a handful of peeled garlic cloves (you can buy them already peeled in jars), some peppercorns, some mustard seeds, and a bay leaf. You can also throw in a couple of cloves and some thyme.

Turn on the crockpot, put the cover on, and go away for six hours.

When you come back, it should be hard to get the corned beef out of the pot because it's falling apart. Use whatever tools you have handy to lift it out, in whole or in part. Slotted spoons or spatulas work pretty well.

Pile it up on a platter or in a big bowl, cover with foil or another platter/bowl, and set it aside to stay warm. Skim the icky-looking foam off the top of the stock.

Transfer the stock to a big pot you can put on the stove and put it on the stove. Bring the stock to a rolling boil and add tiny unpeeled bite-sized potatoes and scrubbed baby turnips. When the potatoes and turnips begin to get tender, add scrubbed or peeled carrots broken into three or four-inch chunks and tiny peeled pearl onions. You can pretty much fill up the entire pot with the veggies, as long as there's enough room that the stock doesn't boil over.

When the carrots are done, dump shredded cabbage into the pot, cover it, and turn it off. (You could also use cabbage cut into wedges, of course.) Get a plate out of the cabinet and put some corned beef on it. Put the plate on the counter, come back, and drain the veggies. (You could save it for cooking

other veggies later--it's okay to re-use as a cooking liquid, but it's too salty to use as soup.)

If the pot's heavy to lift, you can spoon the veggies out with a slotted spoon into a bowl or colander, and then pour the last of the stock through the colander to get the garlic bits.

Put veggies on the plate with corned beef. Add another spoonful because they smell so good. Eat. Watch out for the cloves, peppercorns, and the bay leaf.

Repeat until you flinch at the sight of corned beef.

- Current Mood: hungry
- Current Music:Frida Snell - Lucky Day

Tags:

- recipes

[Private] I want to be that guy again.

- Jul. 22nd, 2008 at 10:00 AM

I went by the climbing gym last night, really early, before anybody else was there (The place is dead until 6 on weeknights, and I was counting on that) and hung out with Archie for a while. Talked to him about rehab, and what he did to get back in the game when he busted his ankle bouldering. He suggested I switch to a grigri for belaying for a while, to keep the strain off my wrist once the cast comes off, and that I see how the wrist was doing and maybe tape it up or use an elastic brace when I started climbing again. 'Course, that way he gets to sell me some gear....

I can belay leftie, too, so that's not so bad.

I think my shoulders are healed enough to do a little traversing when the cast comes off. Gotta come back slowly. Amy says those muscles will always be subject to reinjury now. But she thinks I can climb when the cast comes off. And I can reach over my head now.

I think I might tape up both wrists. It can't hurt, and I can't exactly button my cuffs over the marks in a t-shirt. If I can stand the tape. I can just about stand the shirt cuffs. Wristwatch, not so much. And yeah, the gang has totally noticed.

But then I went home and while Hafs and T. and Harpy were at the movie, I held onto the thing last night. Two rounds. Seven seconds and ten seconds. Pretty soon I will not be buying bags of shredded coleslaw cabbage and pre-peeled garlic for my New England boiled dinner, dammit.

Argh. I have got to figure out how not to be available on Saturday for the matinee. Maybe if I meet them for lunch after? I read the reviews. I know the mythology. I *so* do not want to see that movie. Not this year. Maybe not ever.

No.

I'd be praying for Daphs to figure it out, except I don't want her to know.

Train time tonight, after PT and work. I think I'm starting to get the hang of this.

Is that a good thing, or a bad one? Dunno. But I've got to do it. It's not like the New Normal is going away.

Everybody's got some pride--
Deep in your pocket or up your sleeve
Believe what you want to
But deep inside the devil knows it's you and me.

--Semisonic

- Current Mood: depressed
- Current Music:Frida Snell - Valentine's Day

Tags:

- the new normal

[private] Downtown Train

- Jul. 22nd, 2008 at 7:42 PM

8) I will be able to climb again. Maybe. How well is anybody's guess, but I will be able to climb.

9) I got a good one on the train tonight, for a change. I was starting to think I *only* got bad ones.

10) 22 seconds.

- Current Mood: grateful
- Current Music:Steve Earle - The Revolution Starts

Tags:

- gratitude

Eat your veggies poll!

- Jul. 22nd, 2008 at 7:47 PM

Poll #1227984

Open to: **All**, detailed results viewable to: **All**. Participants: 165

What do you call edible plant material other than fruit, herbs, and grains?

View Answers

vegetables
112 (41.3%)

veg
15 (5.5%)

veggies
102 (37.6%)

rabbit food
20 (7.4%)

fodder
2 (0.7%)

ticky!
20 (7.4%)

Where do you live?

View Answers

USA
138 (82.6%)

Canada
7 (4.2%)

England
11 (6.6%)

Australia
5 (3.0%)

Other English-speaking ticky
3 (1.8%)

Other non-English speaking ticky
3 (1.8%)

- Current Mood: hungry
- Current Music:They Might Be Giants - Minimum Wage

July 23rd, 2008

Sorry--

- Jul. 23rd, 2008 at 9:54 AM

I'm going to be taking a vacation from livejournal for a while. This is not where I need to be right now.

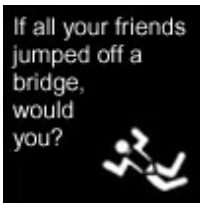
Sorry.

Maybe later.

- Current Mood: uncomfortable

[Private] gratitude, my ass

- Jul. 23rd, 2008 at 10:07 AM



The problem with being around normal people is that it shows me how much the gang is making allowances for me, and how much they're censoring everything they do and say.

Because every single conversation with somebody who *isn't* walking on eggshells sets off every alarm bell I have, and I just can't take it anymore.

It's so hard not to look crazy when you are.

I can't keep doing this. But I don't know what else I can do.

- Current Mood: angry/sad

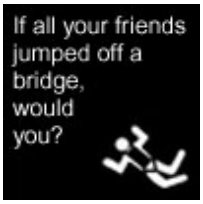
Tags:

- gratitude

July 26th, 2008

[Filtered] Not really breaking LJ silence

- Jul. 26th, 2008 at 7:46 PM



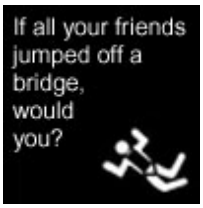
So, er. **leahbobet**. I need to get out of US jurisdiction for 48 hours.

Offer of your futon still open Sunday night?

July 28th, 2008

[Private] Next trick, hiding skyscrapers in plain sight.

- Jul. 28th, 2008 at 3:49 PM



Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!*

It's around nine hours to Toronto by car. Okay, a little less the way I drive.

Nine hours is plenty of time to get cold feet. To remind yourself that nobody, not even me, can plan and execute an exit in under 24 hours, alone, with no co-conspirators. (Poor Blue Beetle; she's been taking it easy for a while now. I don't think she was expecting a midnight run across the border.)

But then I got to Toronto, and I realized how good it was just being here. Being someplace where I still liked the guy I was, the last time I visited. Where I never stopped being that guy, and I don't carry a gun, and people look at my tatty old cast in corner fruit markets and say cheerfully, "That's got to be coming off any day now! I bet you can't wait!"

Also, the CN tower (**leahbobet** took me today, for that and pea meal bacon sandwiches, which are perhaps the divine bacon sandwich) is still cool. I have to save some of this preserved salmon for Hafs, as kind of an apology.

So I spent some time on the train and on the trolleys (Trolleys! I love trolleys!) last night, curled up in the corner, polishing the mirror. I'm getting the hang of that face, and all the ways it works, and looking like the guy people expect me to be.

And as I was walking around the city last night after the trains stopped running, I also figured out that as long as I didn't get hurt too bad to walk

away after, the hard part is done for me. Nobody's going to catch me unless I let them. Ever. No matter what.

I went and stood on the Bloor Viaduct for a while and watched the cars sail past underneath. Not too many, because it was really ~~late~~ early by then. Just enough to keep things interesting, right? And it was cool and muggy, and they've put up a net to stop the suicides, but you can get around stuff like that if you're determined.

It was cool and humid, a beautiful night. Nobody gave me any trouble anywhere I walked. And I was thinking, okay, walk back to the car now, get your stuff. It'll never get quieter than three forty AM.

It's like Two-Face flipping his coin, right? Leave it up to a higher power. Because no matter how good you are, something can always happen. Ramona was good, after all, and all it took was one off-heading open and tangled lines and a big cement tower not too much different from the one I took an elevator up today to finish that.

And then I realized that even though I could do it, I didn't *have* to. That there was other stuff that I needed... wanted... to do more. So... I'll probably never do this again. Not without a permit, anyway. This felt like goodbye. But I'm glad I came, and made that decision here, instead of just staying home.

So this was good, city anonymity and polite, smiling Canadians and feeling like I was getting away with something. Or could have gotten away with it if I had decided to. But it was *my* choice. Maybe my luck isn't broken after all.

Maybe I just stretched it really hard and it's taking a while to bounce back.

I have to drive home tonight. Work tomorrow is going to suck, unless I take another day off, which I might. Erratic attendance, not the way to fast-track that promotion, cowboy.

*Funny how I never figured out before now what a stone bitch of a

superpower it would be to live with the power to cloud men's minds. Poor Lamont.

- Current Mood: ECR
- Current Music:Ivy - Feel So Free

Tags:

- gratitude

July 31st, 2008

[locked/work] hey guys?

- Jul. 31st, 2008 at 10:38 AM

There's bread in the kitchen.

(I figured out that I can use the robot to knead and rise shoggoth bread, too--I just have to take it out between dough cycles and stick it in the fridge for eight hours to cure, then run it through a second dough cycle in the morning or after work, divide into loaves, rise, bake. I think the texture's not as good, but hey, it's bread, who's gonna say no?)

- Current Mood: accomplished
- Current Music:Shakespear's Sister - Stay

Tags:

- food is love

August 1st, 2008

[private] good things.

- Aug. 1st, 2008 at 8:00 PM

11) Cast off on Monday.

12) I made pizza tonight, though I let the robot do the kneading, made a pan pizza so I wouldn't have to roll it out, and used sauce in little plastic pouches. It has roasted garlic and sundried tomatoes and crumbled goat cheese on top, and it tastes like real food.

13) 63 seconds. I cut up the tomatoes.

14) one week to music, courtesy of Wabbit and Wonder Woman, who are awesome and I don't deserve them.

- Current Mood: anxious
- Current Music:Shark Week

Tags:

- gratitude

August 2nd, 2008

[private] Irony.

- Aug. 2nd, 2008 at 10:00 AM

I remember, as a kid, waking up to the sound of rain pounding on the roof and being so scared. I mean, *rain!* It could fill the washes and underpasses

and be strong enough to wash away people, cars, anything in its way. In the desert, a single rainstorm can *kill*. I saw the TV news footage, man. I knew that.

So when I heard it rain, it was like hearing it coming for someone. I couldn't sleep again 'til it stopped.

And lightning: how hard is it to be the tallest thing for yards in any direction out on the Mojave hardpan? Flash, crack--it was always the sound of something I cared about getting hit.

Last night the sound of rain woke me up. Half woke me up, anyway. And I thought, *Thank god. The fire won't spread. They'll get here.*

Then I woke the rest of the way up and had a nice twitch about that. But when I was done, I fell asleep to the sound of the rain.

- Current Mood: in flux
- Current Music:Sugar - Hoover Dam

Tags:

- gratitude,
- the new normal

August 3rd, 2008

[private] be careful how closely you identify with those totem animals, man.

- Aug. 3rd, 2008 at 10:48 PM

The ~~Dinosaur~~ Discovery channel informs me that coyote attacks occur when the animals lose their fear from living too closely with humans.

It's a good thing I don't have a room-mate, because I was laughing so hard I think I scared the Angry Kitteh off the fire escape, and she may have taken the cookie sheet with her. And I'm not sure I could have explained what was funny if you offered me a cookie for an answer.

- Current Mood: ironic

August 4th, 2008

I'm piebald!

- Aug. 4th, 2008 at 12:51 PM

In the absence of the cast, my right wrist and forearm are about ten shades lighter than the left ones. Or my right bicep.

Uh. Er. Hi, guys. I apologize for the melodrama and the vanishment. I just needed some introvert time to get my head on straight and be able to deal with people again. I dunno how much I'm still going to be around, but... you know. Don't worry if you don't hear from me for a week or so sometimes. I'm going to try to enjoy what's left of the summer.

trollcatz, Tasha promised to meet me at the gym tonight to celebrate.

Wanna come? I already know I'm not going to be good for much beyond maybe a little traversing, but I want to try. And afterwards there could be 'spro and pie....

- Current Mood: relieved
- Current Music:Crooked Still - Last Fair Deal Gone Down

[Be still, my heart.]

- Aug. 4th, 2008 at 10:09 PM

Scottie Chapman is back on *Mythbusters* for this one ep.

Tell me [this is not among the hottest women on Earth].

[No, really.]

- Current Mood: infatuated
- Current Music:Mythbusters - Supersize Myths

August 5th, 2008

[[private] Woke up, got out of bed]

- Aug. 5th, 2008 at 11:32 AM

Thank you, brain. Thank you, subconscious. Yes, I really needed to know that that thing they show people doing in movies, where they start up in bed from a sound sleep, is not only real, but an understatement. Reality is more like, sound asleep to the bedroom door--zero to sixty--as fast as the skeletal muscles will contract.

Not to mention thinking I was going to have a heart attack.

I couldn't shake it. The room was too small, and too dark, and so quiet. I had a crazy moment when I thought, "What if I'm dead? Would I know?" I

needed someplace to go that wasn't where I was.

So I dragged the blanket off the bed and half-crawled up to the Beach. Wrapped myself in the blanket and waited for my heart to stop trying to break my ribs.

Even at night, there's cars going by down in the street. I heard the neighbors' air conditioners humming away like cicadas with no high frequencies. It smelled like car exhaust and roof coating and the early-morning prep at the diner down the block. Now and then a bat went over, half-invisible like a Romulan ship with a wonky cloaking device.

I thought of that song--that song that everybody thinks of in those circumstances--and started singing, really softly, "When I come home feeling tired and beat..."

I almost stopped. But it felt right. Sad, but right. So I went on. And after a while I noticed that my heart was back to normal. Exhausted, though. God, that wears a person out. I lay back to rest a little before I went downstairs.

And fell asleep.

Parts of me are stiff and sore today, including my brain. But I think the brain part might have been true even without the weird sleeping arrangement.

- Current Mood: tired
- Current Music:depositions

Tags:

- the new normal (or not)

August 6th, 2008

Not enuff boom in my life.

- Aug. 6th, 2008 at 11:04 AM

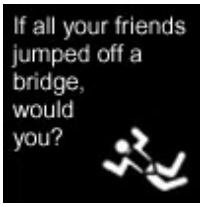
Hey, guys.

Let's call it lunchtime and go make some holes in paper.

- Current Mood: bored
- Current Music:Radiohead - Bullet Proof...I Wish I Was

Aug. 6th, 2008

- 5:16 PM



Do you have any pornography that simulates having a significant relationship?

...and hey, look at that, time to go climb!

- Current Mood: it only hurts when I laugh
- Current Music:The Stars - Your Ex-Lover Is Dead

I can do this.

- Aug. 6th, 2008 at 7:33 PM

Right.

So I'm still not very good at it. Can't stay on an overhang, and my shoulders and wrist are sure I'm aiming to kill them when I try. No grip strength. No endurance. Recovery time is measured not in minutes but in days. Just belaying Tasha, all hundred twenty-five pounds of her, wipes me out.

But I wasn't very good at locomotion or talking when I started trying to learn that, and that was frustrating and hard, and I got there. And at least this time I have muscle memory and brain and skeletal development on my side. I mean, it's not like I'm starting from scratch. And concrete achievement is good for your brain chemistry, and so is physical activity.

You never get it all back, right? You just learn to live with whatever you've got left.

Okay.

I can try that.

- Current Mood: tired
- Current Music:And You Will Know Us By The Trail Of Dead - To Russia, My Homeland

Tags:

- rehab: climbing,
- the new normal

August 7th, 2008

[private] this is my rifle. this is my gun.

- Aug. 7th, 2008 at 9:02 AM

Weapons are just tools. Believe it.

A weapon is whatever you have in your hand when the bad guy comes after you or somebody you are supposed to be protecting.

The fact that weapons are tools for injuring or killing people doesn't enter into it.

A gun is just a tool.

A knife is just a tool, same as a gun.

Anything can be a weapon. Or a tool, too, depending on how you use it.

If you are scared of your tools, you will be less likely to learn to use them well. You will be more likely to make mistakes.

If you learn how to use your tools, you will be able to control them, and get the results you want *when* you need to use them.

That is all for now.

Come back when you've *learned* it.

- Current Mood: numb
- Current Music:My Favorite - Le Monster

Tags:

- the new normal

August 11th, 2008

Desk. Right here.

- Aug. 11th, 2008 at 12:17 PM

So, that means I'm back, right?

There was this dream. And you were in it, and you--

Hey, wait. Does that mean I'm in Kansas and they're still gonna kill my dog?

I may not still be dreaming, but I don't think I'm awake yet.

Wow.

- Current Location:Desk.
- Current Mood: dizzy
- Current Music:BRMC - Rifles

August 12th, 2008

[private] Lights! In sky!

- Aug. 12th, 2008 at 10:47 AM

The weather cooperated--a few clouds, but not enough to block the view. The Perseids from the Beach were great. Even worth being underslept again today.

Every year I forget what they're like, until I see the first one. Even here, with the light pollution, they're like bottle rockets. Not as good as out in the desert, of course. I used to think I could *hear* them when I watched them in the Mojave.

So beautiful. And like always, watching them, I thought, *Everything's moving.*

I just realized, I could have invited the gang over to watch 'em. Back in the day, I think I would have. Wouldn't I? Why didn't I? It could've been fun. We could have had a picnic.

...Except if I had it to do over, I still don't think I'd do it.

...Is that a bad sign?

- Current Location:planet earth
- Current Mood: yaaaawn
- Current Music:Van Morrison - Wild Night

Tags:

- the new normal

3:16

Aug. 12th, 2008 at 8:24 PM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZMGuAJpguY

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It appears to have been S1E6 of Good Eats: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn7fJvnThQU]

- Current Mood: hopeful
- Current Music:Good Eats - Churn Baby Churn

Tags:

- the king of spices

August 13th, 2008

Omnivore meme

- Aug. 13th, 2008 at 9:14 PM

via leahbobet, a meme

Here's what I want you to do:

1) Copy this list into your blog or journal, including these instructions.
2) Bold all the items you've eaten.
3) Cross out any items that you would never consider eating.
4) Optional extra: Post a comment here at www.verygoodtaste.co.uk linking to your results.

(The VGT Omnivore's Hundred:)

1. Venison
2. Nettle tea
3. Huevos rancheros
4. Steak tartare
5. Crocodile (Does alligator count?)
6. Black pudding
7. Cheese fondue
8. Carp
9. Borscht
10. Baba ghanoush
11. Calamari
12. Pho

13. PB&J sandwich
14. Aloo gobi
15. Hot dog from a street cart
16. Epoisses
17. Black truffle
18. Fruit wine made from something other than grapes
19. Steamed pork buns
20. Pistachio ice cream
21. Heirloom tomatoes
22. Fresh wild berries
23. Foie gras Hmm. I note it's foie gras, and not the pate de.
24. Rice and beans
25. Brawn, or head cheese
26. Raw Scotch Bonnet pepper
27. Dulce de leche
28. Oysters
29. Baklava
30. Bagna cauda
31. Wasabi peas
32. Clam chowder in a sourdough bowl
33. Salted lassi
34. Sauerkraut
35. Root beer float
36. Cognac with a fat cigar
37. Clotted cream tea
38. Vodka jelly/Jell-O
39. Gumbo
40. Oxtail
41. Curried goat
42. Whole insects
43. Phaal
44. Goat's milk
45. Malt whisky from a bottle worth £60/$120 or more
46. Fugu
47. Chicken tikka masala
48. Eel

49. Krispy Kreme original glazed doughnut
50. Sea urchin (snot)
51. Prickly pear (wild, even. I have foraged my own.)
52. Umeboshi
53. Abalone
54. Paneer
55. McDonald's Big Mac Meal
56. Spaetzle
57. Dirty gin martini
58. Beer above 8% ABV
59. Poutine
60. Carob chips
61. S'mores
62. Sweetbreads
63. Kaolin (But I've eaten a lot of dirt)
64. Currywurst
65. Durian
66. Frogs' legs
67. Beignets, churros, elephant ears or funnel cake
68. Haggis
69. Fried plantain
70. Chitterlings, or andouillette
71. Gazpacho
72. Caviar and blini
73. Louche absinthe
74. Gjetost, or brunost
75. Roadkill
76. Baijiu
77. Hostess Fruit Pie
78. Snail
79. Lapsang souchong
80. Bellini
81. Tom yum
82. Eggs Benedict
83. Pocky
84. Tasting menu at a three-Michelin-star restaurant.

85. Kobe beef (but I have had the American imitation)
86. Hare (Jackrabbit count?)
87. Goulash
88. Flowers
89. Horse
90. Criollo chocolate
91. Spam
92. Soft shell crab
93. Rose ***harissa***
94. Catfish
95. Mole poblano
96. Bagel and lox
97. ***Lobster*** Thermidor
98. Polenta
99. Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee
100. Snake

Moral? I will at least *try* to eat anything.

I failed Limberger, though. It made me throw up in my throat a little. And durian gives you sweat sock burps.

- Current Mood: indescribable
- Current Music:Ani DiFranco - Studying Stones

Tags:

- meme

August 15th, 2008

What single people do on Friday night.

- Aug. 15th, 2008 at 11:10 PM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDFgtFXfnv0

[editor's note: an embedded youtube video of muppets singing the Habenera, replacing the words with "mee mee mee."]

- Current Mood:awake
- Current Music:Meep meep meep! Meep meep meep meep!

August 16th, 2008

lime juice really stings on those hands you've scraped up because your calluses are gone

- Aug. 16th, 2008 at 9:54 AM

Today at the farmer's market, a haul of tomatoes like you would not believe. Limonny (I'm going with the old Russian tomato lady's spelling rather than the Dave's Garden spelling, because I bet the old Russian tomato lady got it right), Green Moldovan, Paul Robeson (if you live anywhere where these are grown, and you find them, *buy everything on the shelf*. Best tomatoes ever. Sweet, juicy, meaty, with a complex flavor with hints of smoke and umami. I may eat nothing else until fall.), Grandma's Pick, and Box Car Willie. White Oxheart. Marvel Striped. The obvious conclusion? *Ceviche*.

Ceviche is a cold raw soup made mostly of beautiful wonderful luxurious summertime vegetables. I'm pretty sure it was invented as a way of using up tomatoes. Doesn't matter. It's still amazingly good. If you have a vegetarian friend, you can leave the fish out of some of it and call it gazpacho.

Ceviche only works in the summer time, because the tomatoes have to be ripe to perfection for it to taste like anything other than V-8 with clam juice. It's a lot of knife work--the tomatoes have to be diced up, and it has to be done by hand, or you get mush.

Okay, so what you do is you get a whole bunch of really, really good tomatoes. If you can get different varieties, that's good, because it adds complexity of flavor. Then you assemble the goods:

- a whole lot of really good tomatoes. Three or four pounds is probably enough for, um, me.
- half of a large sweet onion, or a whole medium sweet onion
- about a half pound to a pound of *very fresh* raw scallops or sweet white fish. You could use up to a pound, but I like to limit the protein a little. You could also use crab meat, though I usually do cook that first.
- one habanero or Scotch bonnet pepper
- one long green (Anaheim or similar) chili pepper
- kosher or sea salt
- five or six cloves of garlic
- two limes
- fresh cilantro

Squeeze the limes into a really big mixing bowl. Clean, deseed, devein, and very finely dice the habanero. Exercise all due caution and toxic substance handling procedures while undertaking this hazardous task. Add the finely diced habanero to the lime juice. *Go wash your hands.*

Roast the long green, either on the stovetop or under the broiler. Peel, vein, clean, and deseed it. Chop it slightly less finely and add it to the lime juice also. *Go wash your hands, the cutting board, and your knife.*

Dry the knife and the cutting board and your hands. Finely mince the garlic. Put that in the lime juice too.

Now cut up your seafood in bite sized chunks or shreds. Dump it in the lime

juice. Stir it around. Taste, and add enough salt that it tastes unpleasantly salty, but not inedible. This marinade will work an alchemical magic on the fish, rendering it "cooked" without ever heating up your kitchen. Now mince up a small handful of cilantro--you don't want a strong cilantro flavor, just a touch--and toss that in too.

Leave that to marinate while you mince up the onion very fine, and dump that on top. Now, the tomatoes. You're going to be here for a while, so make sure your work surface is comfy.

Start dicing. Stop when you run out of tomatoes. Dump all this gorgeousness (probably technicolor red and green and orange and yellow and white and violet gorgeousness) on top of the fishy mixture. Stir. Taste to correct seasoning.

Toss in the fridge until it's cold and then take it out again and eat it like summer's almost over. Allllllll those tasty phytochemicals!

Failure modes: Dude. You used crappy tomatoes. Either that, or you got the habanero juice in your eye. Bummer.

- Current Mood: grateful
- Current Music:Consonant - 3 a.m.

Tags:

- gratitude,
- recipes

Menu for the week, or: What I need to cook today

- Aug. 16th, 2008 at 10:13 AM

Basmati rice.
Brown rice.
Start four loaves of shoggoth bread for baking tomorrow.
Some kind of bean and vegetable soup, to use up these carrots and celery and onions.
Sambhar.
Stuffed tomatoes.
Ceviche.
Nightshade casserole (It's like eggplant parmesan with less cheese and more roasted peppers. I'll post a recipe. But they had Rosa Bianca eggplants today.)
Tomato, chicken, and farmer's cheese pizza.
Salad caprese.(I may have overdone it on the tomato purchases, even for me.)(But it's *so good* on the shoggoth bread.)
Tiny purple potato salad.
Twice-baked big giant potatoes (those reheat well, and I have a lot of the farmer's cheese.)
Some meatballs, so I can chunk them in rice or pasta.
I also have enough sweet corn that I could probably almost live on that for a week, if I drowned it in butter.

Cheese is my salvation. It's made of calories. And it tastes good even when I don't feel like eating.

Also, I need to do something calorie-dense with these peaches and apples. But right now I'm going to eat raspberries and tiny husk tomatoes that taste like candy, and start scrubbing potatoes.

- Current Mood: accomplished
- Current Music:Karine Polwart - Hole in the Heart

My new favorite movie.

- Aug. 16th, 2008 at 10:32 PM

Chik yeung tin si. Otherwise known as *So Close.*

Yes, when a virus made a bunch of computer monitors spit sparks, I rolled my eyes. It didn't become my new favorite movie 'til *after* that bit.

- Current Mood: Guh.
- Current Music:Not "Close to You."

August 17th, 2008

[private] There's a lot of peace in a bouldering cave.

- Aug. 17th, 2008 at 1:41 PM

All climbing gyms are secretly the same climbing gym. They are just wormholes opening out in different parts of the country, or maybe the world. I'm pretty sure if you knew the secret password and had the right facial piercings, you could get from Alexandria VA to Paris France by secret otherworld passageways. It would be just like a Neil Gaiman story.

So today I went to the Other Climbing Gym, the one I didn't used to practically live at, and I filled out the waiver and I took off my street shoes and I walked around for a little while smelling chalk dust and feeling the floor bounce under my feet. And because I got there at ten o'clock on a beautiful Sunday when all the climbers are outdoors on real rocks, the place was absolutely deserted.

It was just another iteration of the Ur Gym. It smelled of chalk and the

floors were blue and the walls were gray and covered with patches of tape and weird looking holds--goldfish and numbers and a few things that looked like actual bits of rock.

And I lay down on my back in the bouldering cave, on the crash pads, and spent a while looking at the wall and drinking water.

And then I scooted over to the wall and tried a V0.

I couldn't even start it. I couldn't stand up on it. But it was okay, because there was nobody there except the counter guy, who looked vaguely like a blond Crispin Glover with more junk in his face and kanji tattooed on the insides of his forearms, and he was around the corner setting a route I would have been dying to try back in April. So I tried a different one, and felt it pull all across my shoulders--but I got on it. Shaking like a leaf. Got halfway up onto the overhang and could feel gravity pulling me off it. Was too scared to push through. Everything deserted me--footwork, whatever strength I've gotten back, balance.

And I fell off. With a horrible little squeak like a stepped-on cat.

...and I fell twelve feet onto the crash pad, and bounced, and lay there shivering in a cold sweat until my heart stopped trying to break my ribs.

So after that I didn't try routes. I just got up and climbed up any which way, rainbow route, biggest things I could grab. And when I got to the overhang I fell off. Again and again and again.

And you know what?

It didn't hurt.

...by one o'clock, my hands and shoulders and wrist hurt too much to keep going. But I had remembered that falling off of things is fun. And also that you can control the way you fall by kicking off from the wall when you start slipping.

Maybe next week I'll stand up on that route. If they don't take it down before then. But it doesn't matter, because I still like falling.

- Current Mood: tired
- Current Music:Porcupine Tree - Fear Of A Blank Planet [Album Version]

Tags:

- gratitude,
- rehab: climbing,
- the new normal

"Is the F.B.I. in the habit of cleaning up after multiple murder?"

- Aug. 17th, 2008 at 5:16 PM

Nightshade Casserole

It sounds scarier than it is. Many members of the nightshade family are tasty and wholesome: potatoes, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, tomatillos, ground cherries.

Whatever shall we do with these delicious plants? Why, of course--put them in a pie! Or casserole, anyway.

Here's how you do it:

- Two medium-sized eggplants. Rosa Bianca or another sweet, tender eggplant is best.
- One large tasty fresh tomato

- Bread or cracker crumbs (home-made is best)
- Two sweet peppers, red is best
- Two sweet meaty chilis (very mild jalapenos, for example)
- One large can of some sort of canned tomato
- One half small can of tomato paste
- Roasted garlic
- One half of a large onion
- Two eggs
- Salt
- Fresh-ground black pepper
- Fresh basil
- Garlic Powder
- Fresh garlic
- Roasted garlic
- Olive oil
- Cheese

First, cut up your eggplant in half-inch thick rounds. Salt it lightly (kosher salt is best for this) and layer it in a large colander. Put the colander in a sink or suspend it over a large pot, and put a weight on top of it. One way to construct this weight is to put asmall round plate on top of the eggplant and pile the canned tomato products on top. Leave it there overnight, or for at least several hours, to drain.

If you are using a supermarket eggplant, this step is important, because supermarket eggplant is bitter, and the salt draws the bitterness out, along with a lot of the fluid. Unfortunately, it will also turn the eggplant into sort of flat squishy disks. If you have gotten *good* eggplant, what you are trying to do is just draw out a little of the fluid so that in the long run you wind up with a dryer casserole instead of one that's kind of runny.

Roast the peppers and the tomato in the oven. Take the skins off and the seeds out and slice the peppers into strips. Set aside. Drop the skinned tomato into a fairly large bowl. Add the can of canned tomatoes (if they have a lot of fluid, lift them out with a slotted spoon and save the liquid for soup or something else) and the half-can of tomato paste. Mush this all together. If tomatoes are not in season, you can just use the canned ones.

Now that you have drained your eggplant, start heating a large skillet. When it is hot, cover the bottom with olive oil.

Mix your bread crumbs (dried out shoggoth makes good crumbs!) with some salt, pepper, paprika, and garlic powder. Beat together your eggs with a little cool water and begin dipping each slice of eggplant in the egg wash, and then breading it.and laying it in the sizzling oil. Continue until the bottom of the pan is covered in rounds of eggplant, except for an inch or so of space between them. Fry the eggplant on each side until golden-brown, remove from the pan, and reserve.

Repeat the process, frying the eggplant in batches, until you have cooked all the eggplant. You may have to add more oil as you go.

While the eggplant is frying, chop up your onions and two cloves of garlic. Add one clove to the onions and one to the tomato sauce..

Now clean out the pan, add some more oil, and sautee the onions and garlic.

While those are sauteeing, start building your casserole. Put a layer of breaded eggplant in the bottom of a casserole dish. On top of this, layer other things--some of the tomato sauce, the roasted garlic, the roasted peppers, shredded basil, cheese--I like to use goat cheese or cheddar or farmer's cheese or mozzarella or parmesan, or combinations--whatever. When the onions are cooked, those too. Then another layer of eggplant, and so on until you are done with everything. Sprinkle the last of the cheese on top, put it in a 350-degree oven for an hour, and go play WoW while dinner cooks.

Mmm.

If you like, you can leave out just about everything except the fried eggplant, the tomatoes, and the cheese. If you don't like peppers, for example, that might be smart. Though they do help cram a few more

veggies (And another nightshade!) in there. But without the roasting, the whole thing is that much easier to assemble.

- Current Mood: thoughtful
- Current Music:Clue

Tags:

- recipes

August 20th, 2008

[Private] Well, honestly, the answer to that question is *no.*

- Aug. 20th, 2008 at 5:14 PM

I didn't go to work today.

I am getting better at looking normal, anyway. I'm pretty sure nobody--not even Daphs, and I swear I can feel her watching me--figured out that the reason I keep bringing in piles of food is because I make it and then half the time I can't eat the stuff. I'm fine, mostly, until I pay attention to it. If it's just fuel I can get it down. But if I think about it too much--

--at least that's intermittent now, instead of every damned time I try to put something solid in my mouth.

...I suspect I will never be able to look at a peanut butter sandwich again. Well, I guess I can survive on coffee-flavored energy drinks for the foreseeable future.

But that's not why I didn't go in today.

I went out last night after PT, train time. It didn't go so good. I always figured I might get myself shot one of these days, if I picked the wrong target. I *didn't* figure I'd find out something that would leave me curled up in a station corner shaking like a junkie and wishing myself invisible.

The things parents will do to their children. The things those kids will do to somehow make it all right. Is there a reset button on this fucking planet, please?

So no. No sleep. Didn't even try, spent the night on Azeroth. Called in and left a message on Mom's machine; told her I was working from home.

She called back to ask me what files I wanted emailed, and didn't ask anything awkward.

Mom's all right that way.

Now I have to pull myself together to go meet Daphs and Tasha at the gym. There's not enough Rock Star in the world.

- Current Mood: drained
- Current Music:Crooked Still - Did You Sleep Well?

Tags:

- gratitude (not),
- the new normal

August 21st, 2008

The king of spices--

- Aug. 21st, 2008 at 4:43 PM

[--is a hybrid!]

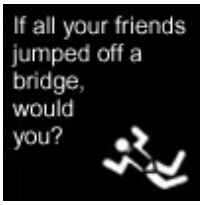
- Current Mood: bored

Tags:

- the king of spices

[Private] I still don't know how much longer I can keep doing this.

- Aug. 21st, 2008 at 8:59 PM



I can feel it in my bones.
I'm going to spend my whole life alone.

The wedding is going to be hard.

I mean, it could be worse. I could be getting on an airplane to go to the wedding Sol's going to this weekend--I guess I will be soon enough, at least its equivalent, because the writing is so on the wall with Tasha and Michael, and ~~*what the hell* **does** *she see in him and what exactly does that imply is wrong with me?*~~ *dude, get over it, you practically* **threw** *her at him*--but god, does anything suck more than being single at weddings?

I mean, I won't be the only one there stag. Though Hafs bringing two dates--a date and a date's date?--probably does something funny to the average.

...I feel really ugly tonight. In both senses of the word. Spiteful and envious and ashamed. And also unlovable. I get so tired of having to do everything by myself. And I feel guilty for even letting myself want anything else. I should know better. Wanting just makes it hurt in the end.

Come on, Chaz. Make the cake. Be happy for your friend. Leave your shitty drama in the car.

I feel bad for Duke. Mister Stiff Fucking Upper Lip over there. No, nobody can see you hurting, man.

Maybe we should split a condo or something. Then at least we'd both have somebody to watch TV with. Apes are not engineered to spend this much time by ourselves.

Why does everything have to *hurt* so much? It's not fair.

At least I don't have to look forward to getting old alone.

You know what? Screw it. Things could be worse. I'm going to go ride the train until I believe it.

- Current Mood: fucking emo and full of self-loathing. again.
- Current Music:just what it sounds like.

August 26th, 2008

[private] apres moi, le deluge

- Aug. 26th, 2008 at 1:46 PM

I wonder what would happen if I tried to go out dancing on Friday?

I guess I could ask the girls to come with me, and then if I overdo it and fall over I'll have somebody to call me a cab. But I'm not sure I want company. I kind of want to go someplace loud and anonymous where nobody knows

I'm different--or Different--and see if I can get a girl to smile at me.

I mean, assuming we're done with the current mess by then.

Oh, gawd. I hope it doesn't stretch on until next week.

That would *Suck*.

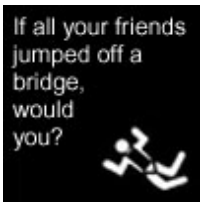
- Current Mood: restless
- Current Music:Crooked Still - Darling Corey

Tags:

- the new normal

hey, trollcatz--

- Aug. 26th, 2008 at 1:47 PM



--you guys figure out where you're going to live yet?

ducks

(My mistress! She's leaving me for another!)

- Current Mood: mean *g*
- Current Music:Crooked Still - Angeline The Baker

August 27th, 2008

The fruits of follow-up appointments...

- Aug. 27th, 2008 at 6:29 PM

Wabbit, I brought you a peach cake from Baltimore. Better get it before Blaze catches the scent.

- Current Mood: nervous

[private] The ticking time bomb is still a dud.

- Aug. 27th, 2008 at 6:47 PM

15) Three months, clean. One more test to go. Stop hugging yourself and shaking, cowboy, you have team in the field and work to do.

- Current Mood: relieved
- Current Music:The 1812 Overture in my head

Tags:

- gratitude

shadow unit

2.02 "Sugar" - by Leah Bobet

Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of. - Nursery Rhyme

And it shall be forgiven all the congregation of the children of Israel, and the stranger that sojourneth among them, seeing all the people were in ignorance. -Kol Nidre

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

Ashton, VA, October 8, 2008

The best time to visit Idlewood Psychiatric Institute is middle fall.

Ashton in early October is the best of fall colour; rust and redbreast leaves trickling down onto still-green lawns and the autumn flowerbeds installed every September by groundskeepers who still believe in Moral Treatment. Idlewood grows its own squash. The pale orange rises against the redbrick walls and fluttering trees and the smell is like Thanksgiving coming in, between the kitchen ovens and the leaves and the Cushaws and Hubbards ripening in the gardens.

They aren't tended by the patients, the way hospital gardens were when Idlewood was first collected out of stone and sweat and a certain nineteenth-century optimism. But the squash gardens still say industry, ripening in the cool of October. Thanksgiving. Full bellies. Easy nights.

Doctor Casey Ramachandran knows this. The families of new patients always first visit Idlewood in early October.

When there's family left.

*

Virginia and Robert Greenwood came to Idlewood on a Wednesday in early October to sign their daughter away.

It was a formality. Susannah had been ceded to the gardens and the walls eight weeks past, but the forms and formalities had to be observed. However

Ginny Greenwood talked of short-term treatment and colleges to her own mother, committed to a looser care in a patch of Florida condos, everyone knew this was for good.

Esther Falkner and Stephen Reyes were there to meet them.

Daphne Worth was inside. Worth did not like Idlewood, but a hitch in her shoulders eased when she could talk shop with medical professionals. Falkner had gauged the angle of those shoulders and sent her indoors fifteen minutes past. "Get the lay of the land from her doctors," she said, even though they already had it. Worth had nearly managed to not look grateful as she fled the crisp-lined parking lot for the shelter of the lunatic asylum.

Reyes had the courtesy not to frown. She ignored him. Compassion was also a *mitzvah.*

The Greenwoods were on time. Esther Falkner heard the tires of their Volvo ninety full seconds before they rounded the corner of Idlewood's private drive; long enough to straighten her jacket and smooth the light frizz out of her hair. It was good to be casual for this sort of job, but not too casual; there were comforts, too, in Bureau professionalism. *Your child is in good hands* Falkner thought through her eyes, her distanced smile, the angle of her back, and breathed it in and out until she believed it.

The Greenwoods' egg-blue four-door turned off the faded blacktop road and parked with a commuter's delicacy. Ginny driving, Falkner thought, still breathing her self-possession in and out. Not Robert.

She imagined her own child, and the steadiness of her hands on a steering wheel.

Reyes started walking as soon as the second car door shut, leaving her to trail along behind him like a subordinate. Not a glance back. Falkner gritted her teeth, moderated her stride so she didn't look like she was working to catch up. *Easy, Captain. That* is *your superior officer there.*

Yeah, one who -oh, forget it.

Her heel caught on a fallen leaf. She shook it off. There were anxious parents waiting for her, the FBI agent, to make things right. *No misbehavior before the enemy, Captain,* she told herself, and smiled with just the right amount of reserve as she shook Robert Greenwood's hand.

"Thank you for coming," she said. *I'm sorry.* They didn't smile back.

"When do we see her?" Virginia asked.

Reyes shifted his weight. "Right away. You'll speak with the doctors, pay a visit, and decide if you want to sign the papers."

If. Stephen Reyes and the illusion of choice. Susannah Greenwood might need her parents to sign the admission to Idlewood, but if they didn't there was always the FBI.

Your child is in good hands, she assured them, herself, again. Gave a half-turn towards the russet-roofed, grey stone and gardened building, rife with squirrel trails and the autumn's last birdsong.

"Are you ready?" Falkner asked, and kept the part of her that was a mother tucked away like a hospital corner.

"No," Robert Greenwood said, and started for the door.

*

Cape Cod, MA, August 24, 2008

They were waiting on the FBI people to put Cecily in the ground.

Nobody'd announced it. But Marissa had told Kevin who'd told Juliana who'd told Susie, and even though Marissa was Summer People she was Cecily's first cousin, so Susie believed it was true.

"We'll bring them something. A casserole," Mom had said upon hearing it from Kevin's mother, and so now Susie was fidgeting in her clean church skirt and sandals in Cecily Marshall's living room and watching Mrs. Marshall cry.

At Gabriela's wake there had been pictures; on the walls, on the mantel, shoved into frames that they didn't fit right just to get them out there. Gaby on a whale-watching boat off Provincetown. Gaby at last year's Homecoming. Gaby looking strangely more foreign as a chubby-faced kid in Brazil. Her great-aunts had draped them in black crepe and flowers and wailed, not just cried but wailed like little kids who couldn't stop for breathing. They played Gabriela's baby videos and cried over them, all dressed in black.

Mrs. Marshall had turned her pictures to face the sky-blue walls. And at Mrs. Marshall's house they could not bury Cecily, and the men from the police station watched everyone.

They weren't trying to be in the way. And everyone in town knew Detective Sergeant Bradford. He'd come to their school when they were in fourth grade to tell them about street safety and Dustin Bradford had been just stupid for weeks, going on about how his dad knew this and that and which side of the street you were supposed to walk on going home. But him being there made things quiet and bad; every single tear some kind of performance of *not guilty,* and she tiptoed around the parents and the whispering neighbours and the eyes that stayed too long on her and skipped too fast past the policemen, and headed downstairs for the basement.

Juliana and Marissa were already down there, sitting side by side on the Marshalls' fuzzy old pool table and sharing a half-melted blue freezie in a dim bit of afternoon sunlight. The balls were unracked. They huddled, clinking against each other, as Marissa shifted her butt back across the pilling felt. Susie waved a little, finger-wiggly, and padded to them over the chilly beige-and-brown lino floor.

There were no cops downstairs. But there was still nothing right to say.

"What happened to her?" Susie blurted after a minute, and Marissa looked down at her hands.

"We went to American Eagle for school stuff," she mumbled. Her hands locked, twisted, twitched. One of them was stained blue from the melting freezie. She wiped it on her shorts; Marissa's mother had been too upset to make her wear a good Sunday skirt. "And she just fell down. Just one second, bam."

Susie sat down on the beige lino and pictured mall security and Marissa's mother and the ambulance men coming through the racks and racks of too-small tee-shirts. The music going loud. Hard fluorescent lights and pink tile and mirrors and screaming. She held onto it. Picturing made it more real.

"And Mom went to emergency with her and told me to go home right away, stay at home, and...when I got home, that was--" She stopped. Susie could fill the word in: *it.*

Poof. Gone.

Susie picked a thread out of her skirt. There would be a special assembly on the first day of school, just like there had been back in grade school when Mikey Cole got cancer. They would make you meet with grief counselors one by one, pull you out of class. *How do you feel about your friend, Susannah?*

Tired, she thought. And hungry. And numb.

There was no sense in talking about it now, the stuff they'd ask and ask and ask. Susie cast around for something better. Something normal. Sane.

So: "How many calories in that freezie?" she asked, and Marissa put it down, a little flushed.

"Just a hundred," she said, prickly. Not too prickly, considering. She lifted her right leg, tucked it under her left thigh. The pool balls rattled. "That's why we're sharing."

"Oh." Susie said.

"Here," Juliana said, and glanced up to make sure nobody was coming down the rough-carpeted basement stairs. "Look."

Nobody was coming. All the cops and parents and neighbours had forgotten about them completely. Juliana turned a little away anyway and hitched up the edge of her shirt.

Her waist was smaller. Susie could tell that much, even with the way Juli was hunched over in case anyone came down. Susie and Marissa took turns examining from the sides. Marissa took a tentative poke. "Situps?"

Juliana nodded. "Fifty every night before bed. Got down to 120," she whispered. Proud. Susie could see the way the muscles shifted and settled under her belly when she straightened. They were fascinating; like newborn puppies dreaming under skin. She tucked away the urge to press her palm against them and feel their dreams.

They'd worked all summer for this, together. Keeping each other good. And now Cecily was gone and all the talk next week at school wasn't going to be about how good the four of them looked, how much it was different from last year, but how Cecily Marshall had fallen down in the middle of a back-to-school sale and died and the cops came to her house whispering about her being abused.

Just like they'd said Gaby killed herself. Not that they shouldn't have called her all the things they did, not that before she died she'd been so beautiful, stupidly crazy beautiful for a whole month long. That she was fat and crazy so she starved herself 'til she died.

Susannah pulled her knees up tight to her chest to stop the hurting in her belly.

Marissa saw her; crumpled the damp freezie wrapper in her hand. "You're not...y'know. Scared or anything."

The silence was absolute.

"You're feeling okay," Juliana whispered, and leaned down to take her hand. "Right?"

Susie's closed around it before she took a stupid second to *think*. Her palm itched. Light, and then nagging hot like a mosquito biting down. *Oh no. No no no.*

"Yeah," she muttered faintly, and let go, yanked her hand back. It shook a little. Cecily's mother ran the air conditioning all the time. Her legs were getting goosebumps.

Juliana looked at her funny, a sideways glance she wasn't supposed to notice, but didn't say anything. Susie rubbed her palms against her thighs; neither the cold nor the stupid rashy heat went away. "Just cold. S'all."

Her stomach turned, rumbled, and finally quieted. The edge of Juliana's ribcage defined sharper, stronger, bright.

She looked away. *How do you feel about your friend?*

"Maybe," she said, shaking a little. "Maybe we should stop."

Juliana's hand was on her belly. She blinked once, twice, shook her head a little like a confused dog. "I don't know," she whispered. "I mean, was it...was it that?"

"Cecily got sick," Marissa said. "My aunt said it was diabetes. It wasn't--"

Susie swallowed. Her mouth felt too thick, like she'd just downed a whole carton of ice cream without a drink of water. The cramped-up muscles in her belly were easing.

We didn't do it. It wasn't our fault.

My fault.

"It was an accident," Marissa whispered. "That's all."

"We stick to the diet," Juliana said, and took Susie's hand in one, Marissa's in the other. Squeezed. The tingling spread to Susie's fingers, became pain.

"We stick to it," Susie agreed, and let her hand go limp.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., August 25, 2008

Esther Falkner was late to the briefing room that morning.

She abhorred lateness. Lateness was undisciplined and unprofessional, and she had too many years of training in her corner to ever consider it anything but implicit disrespect for one's team and one's job. But Ben had called at noon speaking perfectly calm, perfectly reasonable, to tell her Rebekah was curled up in the shower in tears.

For only the third time since joining the Anomalous Crimes Task Force, Esther Falkner shut her office door.

"Go on," she said, seated back at her desk. Phone crooked between her ear and her shoulder and hands spread out over the crisp military corners of files full of pictures of dead children. Breathed in. Breathed out.

"From what I could get out of her, she was out with Tonya Preston and Patty Chung at City Place. They put itching powder down the back of her shirt," Ben said evenly. "Deborah called me at work. Beckie'd already locked herself in the bathroom when I got home."

Falkner couldn't decide whether to be proud or hurt that her littlest called her father first.

"Itching powder." A kid prank. Nothing of any lasting harm, except the part with the random cruelty. The files slipped and gave under the pressure, ran across the desk. She looked down at her hand and eased it, lifted the knuckles. Breathed in. Which meant Rebekah would have taken the bus home alone, albeit in the middle of the afternoon, without letting anybody know first. *Resourceful*, said the part of her mind which commanded FBI teams; a good extraction operation using the local resources. "Resourceful,"

she told the files under her palm, soaking murder into her hands; all the perfectly ordinary cases of bright, well-loved young children who just disappeared.

"Es?" Ben said, softly.

"I'm here," automatic, before she realized it was a technical falsehood. Falkner gathered herself, shut her eyes, stretched her threatening, throbbing back. Breathed in, breathed out. "I'm here, Ben."

Which was when Nicolette Lau tapped on her door, two quick raps that somehow managed to be unobtrusive. Falkner started, reflexes firing, that bland, smooth professional mask fingersnapped back into place. Not fast enough; there should have been no jerk, no jump, no *need.* Caught out.

Lau didn't say a word, just waited patiently on the other side of the narrow strip of double-plate bulletproof glass that Falkner had made a point of never blocking, like most supervisory agents, with blinds.

Falkner raised her eyebrows, one quick inquiry, and Lau pointed to the briefing room. Her face was drawn, mouth tucked tight. *Case.* Falkner gave a nod, replying, and went back to Ben, the phone.

She was going to be late to the briefing.

"I don't think she had a reaction to it. But," Ben said. *But.* "Mrs. Preston."

There was something faint and static on the other end of the line. Water running, the shower? Ben would be sitting outside the bathroom door. Head leaned back against the lock. Waiting for his daughter to come out.

The last of her agents trooped into the briefing room ahead of her.

"You or me?" she asked.

"We should do it together. In person," he said. And he was right, and the briefing room door was open and the clock said five past eleven, and something told Esther Falkner that she would not be in Silver Spring tonight.

She twisted her class ring. It was ugly; Falkner's own taste in jewelry ran to the understated and slim. But she wore it anyway, every day of her working life. It stared back at her, tiger-eye, silent.

"I'm sorry, Ben," she finally said, hearing all-too-clear the water in the background, the silence. "I'm sorry," again and again. "I have to go."

*

They waited for her, of course.

Chaz Villette and Hafidha Gates were two thirds of the way through a box of old-fashioned doughnuts. That's how long she had kept them waiting, although Chaz ate more birdlike since the summer and the fires and couldn't be counted on to keep time anymore. Worth was on her feet, pacing, paused in motion behind Sol Todd's chair; Daniel Brady folded into a fourth chair beside Todd, looking squeezed as he always did in the uncomfortably tight briefing room. Reyes lifted an eyebrow at her from the ostensible head of the table. *Later,* she told him with a tilt of the chin. They were waiting. But they had held a chair open for her despite her habit of standing, and nobody said a word.

"Thank you," she said anyway as she sat, tucked in, because it was better to acknowledge the things you did wrong than let them sit to fester. "Let's not have me holding things up any longer."

At the front of the room, Lau straightened in a way that for any other woman would be a curt, ready nod, and flicked the screensaver off her screen. Two pictures resolved under the projector: bright, happy, distracted. Someone rushed to dim the lights and they sharpened: a summertime beach bikini photo, dustily blonde; a ruffled-prom dress--no, too young. Quinceañera, with that black hair, that dazed girl-bride smile in the summer sunshine.

"That's Cecily Taylor Marshall on the left and Gabriela Carvalho de Santos on the right; both high school juniors in Cape Cod. De Santos died in early July; no official autopsy was permitted by the family, but the physician who pronounced her cited abrupt kidney failure."

"In a sixteen-year-old?" Worth's forehead was scrunched with worry, in lines that mapped where they would turn to tidy grooves in five years, or ten.

Falkner flipped open her file to Cecily Marshall's final medical papers. "Sudden onset of Type 1 diabetes," Lau said before her own eyes got there. "Combined with malnutrition. The working theory was that the diabetes was

undiagnosed and it interacted with severe anorexia." She paused, almost desultory. "Apparently they go together."

Worth shifted in her chair. Her hands were knotted on her lap, almost out of sight under the table. "Yeah. There's an initial weight loss when they get diagnosed. Then everyone starts complimenting them for it, so they start monkeying with their food and insulin."

"How common?" Falkner asked. The air-conditioning hummed, straining.

"Enough."

Too much.

"Cecily Marshall died two days ago," Lau continued. "Massive coronary, brought on by severe malnutrition. She collapsed in the middle of a mall while back-to-school shopping with her cousin and aunt. Rushed to the hospital and died on the way. Our victims were friends; they went to the same high school."

Brady lifted one heavy eyebrow. "Who contacted the FBI over two?"

It sounded callous. It was, perhaps; calluses were the things you built up to protect your skin against repeated damage. But he was right: this wasn't a federal matter, never mind one that would make it all the way through Down the Hall and to the Anomalous Crimes Task Force.

"Wait for it. Here's the after," Lau said, and clicked her button again.

These were familiar; morgue photographs. Bodies laid out, false-looking and still, on careful metal tables. Skin drained of *something*; clinically it was probably the blush of blood moving from cell to cell, but Esther Falkner always thought of it as the soul. There were no marks; no contusions. In the headshot, the blonde was thin and pale as Sleeping Beauty.

And then *click*, the full-body shot.

Under the pale green sheet Cecily Marshall's ribs were enumerated, sharp as starfish. Her hipbones splayed from discoloured skin like growths. The legs tapered down like stick-figure limbs, ridiculously long and gangly without their flesh. The curve of her jawbone, the skull was clearly visible under what had once been grinning red cheeks.

She looked like a famine victim. She looked like--

--naked protruding ribs, his spidery arms, his hair, the jeans that sagged on his jutting hipbones, his bare feet--

There was a little scrape as the wheel of Chaz's chair locked, snagged on its own awkward joints, and tugged at the carpet. *Don't*, Falkner thought, even as her head already turned to glance over. Everyone else in the room was looking at him too. They all looked away just as quickly. Clockwork.

He didn't react. He stared at the picture of the dead girl so hard he might well be memorizing it. He sat so still he trembled.

Chaz Villette knew all the ways to die of starvation.

Silence spread, puddled in the corners of her briefing room. *Shower water over the phone.* Worth reached out for Gates's hand, squeezed. Brady's face was closed for business; impassive, hard.

"Go on, please," Falkner said, and leaned deliberately forward to regard the picture on the wall. Ribs and hipbones. Sunken skin. Two dead girls in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

"Ah," Lau said, genuinely discomfited. Blinking to get back her cool and poise. She'd known; she'd have to have known what that would do. But there was knowing, and then there was knowing. And if Chaz Villette was going to stay here, stay with them, he was going to have to learn to take the sight of that ribcage in, one case, one swallow at a time.

Which didn't make it better, of course.

"Local PD is investigating the family for Munchausen-by-proxy or abuse," Lau said. "They're holding the second body for autopsy. There's a detective there who kicked this up for assistance. He's read about suicide clusters and seems to feel out of his league. Good thing he did. It tripped the flags and came down to us."

"And the first body?" Falkner pressed. Get through this, through the next minute and they could be back on topic again. They could be a team around a table doing their jobs.

"Would have to be exhumed," Lau said.

She risked a glance over at Reyes, leaned back in his chair with his arms folded. He got it; the tight press and twist of his mouth, the lines graven on

either side said he got it indeed. But everything was at least half a test when you were the senior agent in the room, and he wasn't saying anything.

Someone had to ask the question. Esther Falkner counted a slow five beats down, silent. She hadn't hit two before Brady leaned back and said "So why's this on our desk?"

She let out a breath. It was good, the supervisory part of her noted, to have people around who weren't so terribly invested in looking like they already knew.

Lau slid the file shut so gently it didn't even rustle. "Cecily Marshall was sixteen years old and died of a massive heart attack. They weighed the body in at eighty-nine pounds." A pause; maybe presentational, maybe genuine disgust and grief. "At her last physical in May she weighed one hundred and forty five."

"Oh," Hafidha said, muffled and involuntary, and hunched over herself like a wound.

Villette's face was like stone. He hadn't stopped looking at the photo.

"Either we have someone sucking the weight off teenage girls," Worth began.

It hung in the air for a moment. Esther Falkner took aim and shot it down.

"Or we have a plague of gammas," she said.

Both Villette and Gates kept silent as Lau clicked the projector off.

Stephen Reyes shifted in his chair at the head of the table; leaned forward and ready for business. "Gates, dig up everything you can on both girls. We'll start the victimology on the plane. Falkner, Lau, Worth, Brady: wheels up in half an hour. And Villette?" A pause. No reaction. "Villette?"

A blink. Turned head, just a mite too quick to be as cool as Chaz Villette wanted it to be. "Sir?"

"See me before we go."

Chaz's hands grew yet more, impossibly more immobile. "Sir. I'll start getting things together for victimology." He was out ahead of the rest of

them, three quick strides to the door and then a near-silent tread along the hallway.

Falkner waited until the rest of the team filed out of the room, Lau fussing with her laptop and the projector cables, before turning calm and quiet, oh so calm and quiet to face her immediate superior.

"What're you doing?" she asked Reyes mildly.

"He's not ready," he said, face shuttered. Guilt? Irritation? The annoying thing about Stephen Reyes was that, even after her long acquaintance with the expressionlessness of military men, he was so hard to read for sure.

"We knew that," she replied. *Try again.*

Reyes raised one eyebrow. "All right. We're not ready."

Falkner peered out the window to the bullpen. Villette was gathering files together, clearing off a space on his desk. Pointedly not looking to the briefing room door.

Doing his job.

"He came back," she said.

Reyes waited.

"We should too," she finished, and went to collect the go bag from her office.

When she emerged, go bag in hand, Todd was spinning in his desk chair with a thoughtful cast to his face, tapping his lower lip with an old-school yellow pencil.

"You're the responsible adult," she said, and Solomon Todd, old enough to have been brought up on charges for escorting the likes of her to Senior Prom, did nothing but reply, "I'll have them tucked in by ten."

Villette was out of Reyes's office five minutes later, utterly impassive--as if he'd have been anything less had the news been bad--but not shuffling-taut, tension in the legs now that he could no longer hold it well in the shoulders. Not *upset.* He corralled his own desk chair with a brief smile in their direction and grabbed a protein bar or three out of his top drawer.

Reyes emerged after him, go bag in hand, carefully locking his office door. Falkner went ahead and called the elevator for them. She waited until the doors were firmly shut and the car halfway to ground level before she raised an eyebrow at Stephen Reyes.

"He'll continue on active duty," Reyes said.

She did not have to say *good.*

*

Hyannis, MA, August 25, 2008

It was two hours to Barnstable Municipal, and Reyes, Lau, and Brady had spent the whole trip puzzling over their files, over Cecily Marshall and Gabriela Carvalho de Santos, sniffing for signs of gammas. Worth flicked through the hospital reports again and again, not moving her eyes half enough to actually be rereading. Falkner watched.

Cecily Taylor Marshall was left-handed; Gabriela Carvalho de Santos wasn't. Neither had a medical history worth noting: a trip to the ER with a broken leg for one as a child, with no call to Child Services noted. It was hard to read trauma between the lines. The defining characteristic of a nascent, newborn gamma was that they were difficult to find. They looked just like people.

"Thoughts?" Falkner murmured to Worth as the landing gear shuddered out and they made their final approach. Worth jerked her chin up in the seat across.

"Nothing," she said, and flicked the edge of the paper. "Nothing yet."

Barnstable PD had dispatched a rangy, fortysomething officer to meet them on the tarmac; it was a small enough airport that one just hopped out onto the landing strip, free to hypothetically wander instead of forced through tubes into a terminal. Their contact was in sober black uniform despite the heat, hat tucked against his hip, precise and tidy. Military, at a glance. Esther Falkner filed that away.

"Detective Sergeant Will Bradford," the cop on the landing strip said and, unable to read which one of these big-city federal agents was in charge, stuck out his hand for all takers. "I've got the lead on looking into Cecily."

Cecily, she noted. Small town. Everyone watching each other's kids tear through the streets, lawn chairs on a summer evening. All friends here.

Lau intercepted the hand, shook it. "Nicolette Lau. We spoke on the phone?"

Usually local PD brightened a little when faced with Nicolette Lau, or at least had the courtesy to look surprised. Bradford's thin face just solidified into something grim and tired. "We did," he said. "Thank you for coming."

It did not at all sound like he meant it. At Lau's elbow, Daniel Brady's lip twitched in a miniature scowl.

"No thanks necessary," Lau said -- a polite fiction and any working law enforcement officer knew it. Everyone liked to be thanked, recognized. "We're here to help."

Falkner wasn't sure how Lau could say that again and again and keep a straight face, but by the time the introductions came around to her, she was composed and professional and the very picture of a federal agent. She shook the detective's hand on cue and then folded both arms into an at ease behind her back. Lau had engineered it so the detective reached Reyes last, and Reyes took the lead.

"I take it your people have performed the autopsy already?" he asked.

Bradford sagged a little more. It was warm enough out on the tarmac to call it *wilting*. "This morning. They should have results by now. If you'd like them forwarded to you?"

"We'll go see personally," Reyes said, purportedly ignoring the heat bouncing off the pavement. Sweat was making a break for it on his upper lip, and Worth didn't look too comfortable either. "We'd like to interview your ME."

"We can do that," the detective replied, and dug in his pocket for a set of car keys.

"What about Miss de Santos?" asked Brady. He and Lau, Falkner noted ruefully, were fresh as the figurative daisies.

Detective Bradford shook his head, flipping keys until his fingers found plastic and fat. "Cremated. Family's Brazilian, they do that 'round there. Round here," he corrected, a little abashed. "Sorry."

Reyes dropped him a curt, much more distant nod. How to lose Stephen Reyes's sympathy in one easy step. "We'll go straight to the morgue, then," he said, and didn't wait for reply before striding across the tarmac to the waiting cars.

"No morgue," Bradford said, voice dipping as he realized the FBI man wasn't quite listening. "It's at the hospital."

"To the hospital then," Falkner said, and struck a pace halfway between Reyes's hustling stride and an invitation to the rest to get moving. Brady took the cue and swung his bag over his shoulder, eased into a long-legged amble after her. She didn't look back for Worth or Lau. Inertia would carry them along to the cars where Reyes had already chosen the one with another driver, tucked himself carefully into the front seat, and was yanking on the lever that would move it up closer to the dash. Falkner veered off and planted herself in the front seat of the second car, belting herself in carefully while Brady and Worth piled into the back and Detective Bradford flopped into the driver's side with the loose motions of habit.

The radio station was preset when he gunned the engine. There was a half-finished coffee cooling in the drink holder and a picture of something or other dangling in one of those frame-catchers from the rearview mirror. Not a department car, then, but a personal one. Falkner glanced back and Worth was thumbing through that file yet again in the back seat. Worth caught her eye, shut the folder slightly.

Falkner looked away.

Bradford's car started up with a grumble and a hum, finding its gear as the detective fastened his seatbelt. "We're just making sure," he said. Looking at nobody in particular but out the windshield, hands carefully wringing the neck of his own steering wheel. "That no other kids hurt themselves. That's all."

The back seat was silent. Falkner was silent.

The dangling picture turned, stabilized as the car turned and got onto the highway. It was of two kids, both dark-haired like Bradford with the same long faces and little chins. They were knee-deep in the Atlantic surf with the sun streaming in from somewhere. One had a plastic shovel in his hand, and he was smiling.

Small town; potlucks and babysitting and everyone knowing each other's business. Or thinking they knew, and hoping to God that they really did know all there was.

"Don't worry," Falkner told him. "We'll make sure."

The picture swung, shimmered.

"We're here to help," she said.

*

Cecily Marshall had died in Cape Cod Hospital surrounded by some of the finest equipment medical science had to offer, and her body lay in limbo in the hospital's main building basement.

Barnstable and the village of Hyannis did not have a busy coroner's office. The Cape was quiet even before the rich summer people vanished into the airports and down the choked-up highway for another year, and the rare autopsy was handled in Boston by the State Medical Examiner. But Cecily Marshall had not died from violence, so her death certificate was signed by a local doctor and her body tended by a county examiner, an elderly man whose shoulders hunched as if they were not used to hunching, whose lab coat was tidy, pressed, but worn at the elbows -- affection, not need, Falkner guessed.

"Simon Meadowvale," he said, in an accent that was pure old-school Connecticut Gold Coast, the kind of holistic overpronunciation that nobody but the ghost of Katharine Hepburn had anymore. His small, precise frame blocked the doorway, one hand in tight-curled hair far gone to silver and the other latex-gloved at his side. "You'd be the FBI."

People always wanted a dramatic reply to that. They very rarely had one. "We would," Brady said instead, asking admission with a short step forward, a *click* on tile floors that didn't disguise the chill of foundation concrete. Meadowvale acquiesced and backed inside, holding the door open.

The team trooped into the tiny hospital mortuary.

This was not a young building; it had stood still while fund drives put up others around it, and lights, wiring, the slight cramp of the corners all bore the touches of intermittent refurbishing. A far cry from Madeline Frost's warren back in Baltimore, although there were the same scuffs and scattered

items, the same signs of tools arranged to a system only known internally and force-grown from habit and long comfort. The counters were white beyond white, and if the mosaic-chip tiles of the floor were cracked here or there, they gleamed.

"Everyone's been waiting," Meadowvale said, offhand.

"Oh?" Reyes said. His voice was dampened. Soundproofing in the walls perhaps, Falkner thought. To cut down on echoes on one's recorded autopsy notes.

"To bury her," Meadowvale finished. One hand twitched an abandoned set of forceps into place on the tool tray. "They agreed to the autopsy, but they didn't like it."

"You don't either," Reyes said, easing smoothly into the point position. Brady leaned back, carefully, on a vacant counter and crossed his arms loose.

"No," Meadowvale said frankly, and balled up his stray glove, shot it a good ten feet into a wastebasket. "I don't like it when kids die. And no offence to your person, but I don't think you ought to be here."

Worth was studying the tools, the one scuffed metal table, the steady and institutional fluorescent lights the way she'd thumbed through the file, frowning slightly, half-attention. Lau had fetched up beside Brady, a half-step ahead. Falkner stayed by the door, and shut it gently behind them. "What d'you see?" she murmured to Worth.

Worth didn't jump; too well-trained for that. But she tilted her head a little too fast. "It's all freshly scrubbed. He organized everything again." She sniffed a little, demonstrating. "Bleach."

Falkner surfaced quick enough to miss Reyes's next few words and catch the medical examiner's scowl. "I know what Will Bradford and his Captain seem to think, and I don't care. That girl died of functional starvation," he was saying, tense and cool. "And there's no reason for this to have got that far. It's a damn regrettable case, but it's a simple one; you charge the parents with neglect and let the jury decide."

"That's how they did it at home?" Brady cut in.

Meadowvale frowned. "That's how they do it by *law,* sir," he said.

Falkner exhaled quietly. Time to step in. "Detective Sergeant Bradford called us in to make sure this doesn't happen again." Over Dr. Meadowvale's protests, apparently. "If we see that his concern was misplaced, we'll head home gladly." A pause. Count to five, feel the tension pause and drain down a little through the gutters cut narrow in the floor. Competing jurisdictions; the first thing they should teach at Quantico. Forget all that stuff about firing a gun. "In the meantime, why don't we get to the autopsy proper?"

Meadowvale studied her. Suspicious, but he wasn't fidgeting his tools anymore. She offered a distant, professional smile and he gave up the ghost. "All right," he said, and opened the freezer for Cecily Marshall's body.

It would be worse in person. They always were. Lau's face was extra-blank, Brady's casual lean a little too casual as Meadowvale rolled the covered tray from freezer to table, latched it in, donned a new pair of latex gloves and snugged them down.

"You performed the autopsy yourself?" Reyes asked, pulling two gloves like tissues out of the box and sliding his hands into them. They were a touch too big. He pulled them tight at the wrists.

"Just me here," Meadowvale snipped before remembering they were all playing together now. "Yes," he amended, and lifted the sheet.

It was worse in person.

It was not even a body, Esther Falkner reflected, tucked away in the quiet place she kept for overseas combat missions, visits to victims' families, and the viewing of the dead the anomaly left behind. It was near a skeleton already; it had deteriorated, somehow, in the few hours between the snapping of Lau's slideshow photo and their arrival in the hospital where it died. It had no breasts, no hips, no elbows. Meadowvale had tried to pin the chest cavity shut, but there wasn't half enough flesh to make the illusion convincing. It was not a body; it was a wound.

This is what it looks like when a gamma starves to death.

"Her heart gave out," he said. "Blood vessel damage all over the body, and the organ itself was damaged. Consistent elevated blood glucose will cause that, left long enough, especially if combined with malnutrition. I'm agreeing with the emergency doctor's assessment: undiagnosed and untreated juvenile diabetes leading to diabetic cardiomyopathy."

Worth, from the corner, was frowning. Didn't add up. Vote of no confidence. She turned away and rejoined Lau and Brady at the table, who were busily conferring on something that wasn't the thing on the table. Both their faces were like stone.

"That much weight loss," said Reyes. The corner of his mouth twitched down. It wasn't a question. "Sixty-five pounds."

"You have a better explanation?" Meadowvale said mildly.

Falkner pressed her lips together and rewrote the official autopsy results to *I don't know.*

"We should correlate this with our other data," she put into the silence. *Get it to Frost.* Reyes glanced over at her, raised an eyebrow. She kept her face bland. He'd know what she meant.

"We're going to send your results to our expert," he said. The medical examiner squinted a little -- worry? Fear? Outright indifference? -- and eventually nodded.

"You know what you're looking for," he replied, and laid his hand on the sheet that covered the thing that was once Cecily Marshall, well away from the skin. "Anything else? Funeral home's waiting on us."

Reyes glanced around to his team. Infinitesimally, they one by one shook their heads.

"All right," Stephen Reyes said, and peeled away the last fingertip of his glove. "Let her go."

Act II

Ashton, VA, October 8, 2008

Daphne Worth had given herself up for trapped behind the nurse's station when Falkner and Reyes followed the Greenwoods into Idlewood.

The Idlewood nurses liked to talk shop. That was the worst, maybe, of any visit to Arkham; the staff took their security clearances seriously. And they knew that Worth, trained in emergency medicine, had a security clearance higher than theirs and an inexcusable ignorance of all their work stories. All in all, despite the tension throwing off practically visible sparks between

Mom and Reyes and the inevitable shittiness of a day spent justifying the unjust to the family of a gamma -- unsub and victim all in one and so no textbook way to handle it --Worth wasn't sure she'd got the best of the bad deal.

Between the gossip and the horrors and the well-concealed fear, the most she'd got was that Susannah Greenwood was quiet. Beyond that metric, that of good behaviour or bad, the nurses left the assessment of the tics of their charges to the doctors.

"We keep her away from Jessi," the round-faced, stocky one with a nametag that read Sharon put in; she was the clear mother of the crew, tiny and half-stern and everywhere at once. "That wouldn't be a good influence," she said confidingly.

"No," Worth agreed -- it sure as hell wouldn't -- and then the door opened and the funeral procession came through.

"New kid's parents," one nurse muttered to an orderly, and they all melted away, finding files or rotation chores or other things to do and be as Falkner and Reyes led the red-eyed, nervous Greenwoods to Dr. Ramachandran's office.

Nobody had to gesture for Worth to follow. She'd been with this unit long enough to know when it was showtime.

Worth fell into step behind the Greenwoods, walking two imaginary chevrons back. It was no good to box people in. It made them feel afraid, and there was enough to make one afraid within the walls of Idlewood. On the other end of the hall Dr. Ramachandran's office door was propped open, revealing a room amber-painted and warm, stuffed with potted young avocado plants, fat succulent aloes and light cherry bookshelves that caught the sun. Dr. Casey himself was tending to something at the front of his desk, making sure nothing was between him and his patient's legal guardians. Warm, and tidy, and welcoming.

"Mr. Greenwood," he said, and beckoned them in. "Professor Greenwood. I'm Casey Ramachandran. Just call me Dr. Casey," and he put out a hand. When there was no good thing to say, Worth noted, you said nothing at all.

Both Greenwoods took it, shook. Both managed not to flinch at the implications.

"I'd like to brief you on Susannah's progress before we talk about papers," Dr. Casey said, cool and, if not smiling, exuding the concerned competence that a doctor who didn't have to work 24-hour emergency shifts could put off like a lightbulb. Paramedics didn't get that luxury. But again, paramedics weren't expected to do the talking that way; you spoke with your hands, with chest compressions or pressure bandages, and half the time you never found out if the message had come through.

Sometimes Daphne Worth missed her old job. Sometimes it was a terrible thing, to find out how the message was heard at the end.

"We'd like to see her first," Robert Greenwood said, with a set to his mouth that was both anger and grief. Mrs. Greenwood -- Professor, technically -- squeezed his hand.

"Of course," Dr. Ramachandran said smoothly, and held the office door wide for the whole troop to march into the suddenly silent hallway.

They kept Susannah in the outer rings of the building: Limbo, compared to the tucked-away, maximum-secured hallway where types like Bloody Larry were bricked in with not even a cask of Amontillado -- God knew what he'd do with booze and wood splinters. For Idlewood, Susannah Greenwood was pretty mild; so the hallways that Dr. Ramachandran led them through were light-painted, still had a window or two not fashioned of non-shatter glass and close-welded bars. They were brick windowsills and sunshine, and still held some of the ancient, wistful optimism of the original Idlewood Asylum, where the then-humanitarian philosophy of Moral Treatment had laid out the building's bones in light, fresh air, and exercise for another century of the dangerous insane, piled them gently inside, and hoped.

It was calming, even if you knew what it was for. It made one think of times that were more innocent, more naïve.

There was a key, of course. Falkner made a good effort to distract them from it, but both Robert and Virginia Greenwood's were fixed upon that door and no force on earth could take their eyes off it. So there was a key and it was turned, and before the door opened Dr. Casey rapped on the door once, twice, and said "Susannah? You have visitors."

There was no window in the door. He waited a moment until she replied, but all illusion. There were CCTV cameras in every room in Idlewood. There

was a monitoring station where an orderly was perched night and day, and there was a discreet earpiece with a wire tucked behind Dr. Casey's pinna.

Susannah Greenwood was flopped on her flowered bedspread, reading. No telling if it was studied or not; the book looked like AP English, with the glossy bent cover and overcheerful graphics of a new textbook. The nurses had commented approvingly on how she was still working on her high school diploma. "Poor kid," big Sam had said, walking his security patrol past the nurse's station as they had chattered and Worth had waited. "Working so hard to be normal."

Her room was all over posters; bright blue walls and posed bands stuck up with sticky-tac, not thumbtacks, and three flowery soft throw pillows and an mp3 player, because CDs could be broken into something sharp. Susannah looked up as the two senior agents and her parents shuffled into the room after her doctor, and she dropped the book into her pillow.

"Mom," Susannah Greenwood said, wide-eyed and small, and then Reyes and Falkner shut the door gently behind them all.

*

Hyannis, MA, August 26, 2008

Cecily Marshall was committed to earth first thing Wednesday morning. Esther Falkner attended, and she brought her team.

FBI field wear was inherently suited for funerals. One was to be formal and sober; professional. Stay one step above the detectives and men and women in uniform, but not stand out. Without a uniform to rely upon, radiate that discrete brand of authority.

Falkner's uniform was, after all these years, worn on the inside. But she still pressed the best shirt in her go bag to see yet another dead teenager buried.

The service was Episcopalian. She was passing familiar with it after years of military funerals; long over the nagging feeling that any contact with the religious rites of others would stick to her skin after she'd left, need to be washed off later the way you washed death off your fingers on the porch between a graveyard and a shivah house, lest it root and do some irreparable damage. They stood in the back and watched the kids sniffling, crowding the weathered, whitewashed wooden church, stuffed into the aisles and between

pews with tarnished brass nameplates and in the back room that was separated off with a divider hastily removed by the church custodial staff. They listened to the liturgy and the little moans from teenagers clutching each other's hands, all brought up too lovingly to realize that one of their own might die.

Falkner studied them, studied their tears.

Any one of them might be their next gamma.

"It'll come to the service," Reyes had said over dinner the night before, the whole team packed into a wood-and-brine-smell seafood restaurant that was the last place in thirty miles left with a free table for five. It was around the corner from their nondescript chain hotel, also the last place left on the Cape with rooms available in the week winding down to September. *Height of tourist season*, Falkner had realized, and deliberately left thinking about investigations in highly transient populations for the next day.

Falkner picked at her pasta; just about the only thing on the menu she could eat, and thank God she only kept the laws about kosher kitchens and cross-contamination inside the house. Lau had opted for salad. A lot of salad.

A child two tables down shrieked: "Mom, it's *looking* at me!" Brady winced. Reyes ducked his head and cracked a joint from his own lobster expertly, hiding half a smirk. Worth's expression was all concentration; she had a pound and a half lobster in pieces like it was a surgery, and was probably hearing nothing but *scalpel?*

"So we're thinking an *it* at this point," Brady said, blinking the noise out of his ears.

Reyes frowned. They all knew what theories they had about the anomaly were elaborate, carefully-constructed skyscrapers of cards. "We have a few options," he said, wiping one hand careful against his napkin to tick off guesses against fingers. "Either we have one gamma and these are victims; or we have many, who are for some reason flaming out; or," and he paused. "Or it's figured out how to become communicable."

Falkner speared a roasted pepper. She despised bell peppers. But when you were hungry you ate what was put in front of you, so she bit into it anyway and swallowed fast to keep it off her tongue.

"It'd be easy," Worth murmured, and set down her lobster claw. "Chain reaction. One dies and it's enough trauma to set off another. Keep going until you spark two at once."

"Like a virus," Lau kicked in, mouth twisted, cold and reluctant.

There was a silence around the table. Downwind, the little kid's mother finally turned her staring dinner somewhere else. The wails died down into a grudging sob.

"Bear in mind there's no other evidence for that," Reyes said.

Falkner picked through sauce for a mushroom. "There's a first time for everything."

"So what're we profiling?" Brady asked. "Patient Zero or a full-out unsub?"

Reyes pursed his lips."Whatever comes our way," he said, and lifted one hand for a waiter to make them up doggy bags. Falkner surrendered her pasta. She hadn't cared for it, still didn't later, when she crept out of bed at midnight to eat the rest cold, but nobody raised by survivors ever dared waste food. It sat heavy in her stomach when she woke up, and then heavier still as the teenagers gulped and sniffed and clung to each other in their little small-town church as their friend was laid to rest.

The service was ending; the minister had wound down, and the family was full-out sobbing, and *I will lift mine eyes unto the hills,* the black-gowned choir sang. *Whence shall come my help.*

Whence indeed, thought Falkner, and watched for the unseeable as the congregation began to pray.

She watched, moving careful, as the coffin was lifted and borne on the backs of uncles, cousins, friends. The people stuffed into the pews streamed after it, bleeding through the aisles and out into the light, around back where the families who had lived here generations kept a tidy graveyard tufted with thick grass and crabapple trees.

The words were spoken over the hole. The box was lowered, and the dirt sprinkled in. The crowd drew breath, all at once.

In a corner near the grave, a dark-haired slender girl in a lacy black Sunday skirt reached for the hand of her even thinner, shuffling friend, and squeezed.

The second girl shuddered like she'd been hit.

The dirt went into the grave.

The traffic was already high when the crowd dispersed again, thick and crawling, tourists and summer visitors trawling along the shimmering roadways past the church where a caravan formed. It pointed back to the Marshall residence, where a catered lunch was no doubt laid out for the people come to mourn their daughter's starving away.

Esther Falkner's team climbed into the black SUV that the regional office had finally given over; shut the doors, belted quietly, surreptitiously. You could hear the sound of cicadas through the window seals; cicadas and the ocean.

"All right," Reyes said, and turned the key in the ignition. "Suspects."

*

Hyannis, MA, August 26, 2008

After the funeral, packed in black dresses and their best tight shoes, Susie and her mother drove ten miles above the speed limit to make it on time to the doctor.

"How long again since your last period?" Doctor de Guzman asked. It was right there on the file. Susie swayed from left hip to right just to hear the exam table paper crinkle and ignored the aching in her stomach. No breakfast this morning. Hands in her lap; they were still tingling from the funeral, from Juliana's grab and squeeze that she couldn't, just couldn't turn away from. *Yeah, couldn't,* said the bit of herself that pointed out the things she didn't really want to hear. She shoved it aside. Mrs. Marshall's crying had made her empty belly feel like air and stone.

Mom was watching her, calm as ever. Susie could make her wait outside now -- she was sixteen and had the right to be private with her doctor -- but then she'd just have to tell Mom afterwards 'bout everything Doctor de Guzman said, and it was less painful this way. Less like lying.

"Four months," she said, and tried not to meet anyone's eye.

"Hrm," said Doctor de Guzman, in the same way she had right before she'd whipped out the tongue depressor back when Susie was thirteen and pronounced her sick with bronchitis. "I think we'll need to do an exam."

She was almost apologetic about it. *Well, I would be too,* Susie figured, remembering the cold metal, the feeling of being so horrifically... *exposed.* Mom had changed her from Doctor Steve, who she'd seen since she was a little kid, to Doctor de Guzman when she'd turned twelve. She hadn't figured out until that first exam why, and then it was a little too embarrassing to thank her mother for it outright, something she couldn't quite get up the nerve to talk about between them even with the years of sex ed and *this is the difference between girls and boys.* It was different when it was your body, something inside you. That was different than a coloured diagram on a screen.

Now Mom got up, awkward too, and murmured something about being just outside while Doctor de Guzman guided Susie's feet into the metal stirrups on the examining table, got her to inch forward and backward and just so until whatever angle she needed for this was right.

The trick was to think of something else. She worked hard to think of something else.

She thought about Cecily in the ground, the same way Gaby wasn't anything but dirt in a fat brass urn. She thought about the itch on her hands; the inches of Juliana's waist. What if the doctor found something in the blood or tabs or bottles, something that showed all the things Susie'd been doing?

What if she didn't?

Susie squeezed her eyes tight and concentrated on the cold metal instead. Once it withdrew Doctor de Guzman was quiet. She heard pen scratching on paper and tentatively sat up, legs curled across each other, the awful blue paper gown draped over them like a shield.

"All right there?" the doctor asked, and lying with the ease of habit, Susie nodded. The doctor smiled, encouraging, and let herself out.

Susie sat for a moment, aching inside and out, and then scrambled for the black dress, the tights and panties, the shoes.

They were talking outside, she noted, as she plucked at her tights, trying to ease them up snug over her thighs without poking her fingers right through. *Secret stuff,* her brain noted; about calories. About food and measuring tapes

and how she couldn't do it honest, how her helping turned dirty and her hands got hungry and stole.

She dressed quicker.

There was no trace of secrets when she opened the exam room door. Doctor de Guzman smiled at her distractedly, and Mom looked worried, those lines in her forehead creasing up and blending, making her look so much older than she ever did. Old enough to have a teenager. Nobody ever thought she was.

"Iron," Doctor de Guzman said, finishing with Mom, starting with her. "Lots of protein. We'll have the glucose tests back by Thursday, and until then, good nutritious meals."

She couldn't keep the look off her face. Or she was sure she didn't, because Doctor de Guzman patted her shoulder, halfway like you did for a kid, and said: "Don't worry. We'll sort this all out."

Her shoulder tingled where the doctor touched it, sharp and then hot, and then settled into an itch. A burn. Her hand echoed sympathy. Her stomach turned and sighed.

It was spreading.

"Yeah," she stammered. The doctor blinked, her face going sallow and awful, her hand dropping to her side. She swayed on her feet.

Susie fled.

Mom caught up to her at the car. She couldn't run fast, not so hungry as she was, even with the tingling on her shoulder that she wanted to dig out with her fingernails and throw into the sea. She couldn't run fast and really there was nowhere to go, nowhere but the car which she didn't have the keys to. And home. And school. And home again.

"Susie," Mom called, out of breath a little, and then "Susannah!"

Don't touch me. Oh please, she thought, and hugged herself in a little tighter. Faced straight into the car window so her mother's hands would keep away.

It worked. Mom gave a little sigh and went around to her side of the car, unlocking the door with the remote as she went. Susie scrambled into the car and belted herself in tight, sticking to the door once she closed it after her.

Mom was silent for a few moments; key in ignition, one sharp turn, pull out of the parking space and join the short line to turn out of the parking lot onto the road, head for home.

They didn't have the light. The car idled.

Her stomach muttered satisfaction.

Mom must have looked over; taken her eyes off the road in the way that she told Susie never to do when they were out practicing on the backroads after school or at odd hours, and seen her reflection crying in the windowpane. Because "Oh, honey," her mother said, a little breathless, and then her arms were around her back, made awkward by the gear shift between them, the stuffed fabric ridges of the passenger seat. Someone honked behind them. Mom ignored it and ran her hand up and down Susie's back, petting like when she was a little kid and could cry herself into hyperventilating from a bad dream.

The burning caught along her spine. It followed the sweep of her mother's hands and trickled down through her muscles, along the pathways of her arms. Her wrists felt thicker. Her stomach ached. She looked down and her hands were fat again, wide and fleshy and soft.

Too late.

The other car pulled around them with a screech and a snarl. Susie leaned into her mother's shoulder and cried until she couldn't breathe, big fat baby sobs, cried herself scraped and empty.

"Tell me," her mother said, and stroked her hair in a way that brought up new pain.

There was no telling. Not the truth. But she could tell something, and something bubbled up, and "M'gonna be--" *Gaby and Cecily. Burned up. In the ground.* She couldn't even say their names. It all came out twisted, knotted up in her throat and didn't let her talk about the scratch she got in her hands, the diet, the nightmares, the way she was just...so hungry.

She didn’t need to.

"You won't," her mother said, and held her at arm's length, hands on her shoulders, chin tilted down and face so serious she'd have thought herself in trouble if not for the way those hands were holding onto her, tight like a

hand run up and down the back. "The doctor's going to fix this, and whatever we need to do, we'll do it." Quiet, and fierce: "You won't."

Susie gulped back tears. Her throat hurt. Everything hurt. *Oh Mom,* she thought, desperate. *You don't understand.*

God she wished she could understand.

"Come on," Mom said. Put the car back into gear, reached out to squeeze her hand.

Shook it a little, as if it had gone numb.

"I know what'll cheer you up," she said. "Let's get ourselves a burger."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., August 26, 2008

Hafidha Gates had sent Chaz out for Ethiopian when the call came in. "Gates," she answered, not even glancing at her old wired-together caller ID. It was Reyes, and from the way Chaz and Duke had been assiduously avoiding each other since the rest of the team went wheels up, Hafidha deemed it a time to be überprofessional.

"Gates, it's Reyes," filtered in through her headset, taut and cranky-sounding. *Uh-huh, baby. Mama knows.* "We need a little digging on our suspects."

"Order it up," she said, bright and sharp, and settled fingers into a loose hover over her keyboard. Not like she needed it anymore, if there was enough to eat around and nobody who might spook over the whole thing was looking. But a body had its habits too. One fingertip brushed the home row. Bright and sharp.

He sent her names. Names from the condolence book, one after another, in impersonal text copied by some local PD dogsbody they weren't trusting with a car or gun yet. They filled two screens like black-and-white fireworks, spilling one onto the next and wrapping around.

"Filter them out; we want people in close and common contact with both girls. Neighbours, classmates, teachers. Community fixtures. And cross-check all those people for anomalous tendencies."

Trauma; that was an easy fit. Hospital admissions, or police calls, or sudden changes in behaviour. High caloric intake could be approximated; bank

records with sharply increased spending at supermarkets. Her left hand resettled on the mouse. "Medical records?"

Reyes let out a breath. "Try the school records first."

Go easy on the kids, honey, she translated, *but not too easy.* "Yes indeed, boss man," she said, and started an idle tapping. The medical records could come later. You couldn’t catch a gamma without breaking a few eggs. Or privacy laws.

"I won't tell," she solemnly informed the naked list of mourners, and got to work.

They were scattered all over the Cape. Not only that, there was a good sprinkle of home addresses that crept throughout the Tri-State Area and Massachusetts; summer people, Hafidha noted, remembering the inevitable plague of winter people back at home, tracking the sun like fatter, tackier birds on the wing. Never the same flock twice. She diverted into another screen to yank up rental records, hotel receipts, credit card trails, and flicked it all delicately into a green-and-blue map. It covered seven towns across the county and spilled over into the sea.

"Popular little thing, weren't you?" she muttered, paring it down into households, sweeping pinpricks of overlap away with one brushed hand. Well, Cecily Marshall wasn't going to have a date for prom either, so there was no sense in being jealous about it.

"Food," Chaz announced, pivoting from the narrow hall through her open door. She heard the soft crumple of paper bags hitting particle board, and the strong smell of doro wat and fresh, soft injera rose in the room like carbon monoxide.

"Mmph," she said, and tagged her map again. Adieu to the right-handed. Rest quiet under your momentary filter. The textbook ninety percent vanished. Still too many dots.

She dumped in the police and hospital admissions data for the past three years, and started sorting.

There was a crinkle as Chaz's hands opened the bag -- she could picture them, thin and deft, and refocused herself away from hands and food and

back onto the faltering stream of numbers -- and the smell redoubled, hot and sweet. The crinkle paused.

"'Scuse me," Chaz said, choked-off, and his feet slapped a retreat out into the hall.

"Hey--" Duke said just outside, and his own step, lighter and quieter and somehow more deceptively so, sounded in the doorway. "Someone's in a hurry."

"Probably being sick," she murmured. The dots denoting Cecily Marshall's family had gone dark. Excellent health, wonderful home lives, and high heels and pearls at dinner, it seemed.

There was nothing she could do. He'd get angry if she followed him to the bathroom and held his hair out of the way and mopped up the toilet seat after him. He didn't want them seeing it and had made that crystal clear.

It made her angry.

Nothing to do.

A map full of dots.

"Seven dishes?" Duke intoned. "So this is why children are starving in Ethiopia."

"Send them yours," Hafidha replied, and hovered over the keyboard. There were other ways than medical records to pluck out trauma; she'd learned them all working with this unit. But none of them were as reliable, or as complete.

Oh, hell.

She cracked open the federal databases and warmed them the hell up. Felt in her fingers that crazy intuition that'd been hers even before everything fell apart and came back together. That flash of colour.

Down the hall, a toilet flushed.

"I don't care," she muttered. "For this much suffering, it had better have each baby finger and all ten toes."

"I was born with eleven," Duke said, tucking injera gently onto a bright blue ceramic plate. He knew where her stash of plates were. The boy was in her

office too much.

"I've seen your toes," she said, tapping in a request that wasn't a request, that wouldn't appear on any logsheet or record.

"I lost one in Vietnam," he informed her, and settled onto the couch with a sigh of springs better put out to pasture. "Going through a rice field. Stepped on a rat trap."

"A rat trap cut off your toe?" Almost there.

"No, the rat," he said. "They were giving me shots for days."

Chaz poked his head around the doorframe before the rest of him. She glanced up, quickly; only that, before the streams of an idea before her lost cohesion, dissolved into nothing but pixels and numbers and lines. He still looked green as a boiled frog. "What? What?"

"Nothing," she said, and the terminal beeped mildly, and she copied those files down to her desktop and eased out of the database like a lady. Blinked. Stretched her hands.

Her stomach rumbled.

She turned around with a sigh, spinning halfway on her desk chair to face the dim tiki lights, the posters, the ratty yellow couch, and the seven dishes worth of Ethiopian food being attacked enthusiastically by Solomon Todd, concerned citizen and activist against African famine.

"Save anything for me?" she asked.

"Of course--" Chaz started.

"I meant him," she replied, and cracked her back, one vertebra after another. A good research burn was like slamming. Totally absorbing, clean and sharp and focused, and then afterwards you felt like canned shit. "Gimme some of that injera."

They loaded up their plates in silence, breaking all the rules and then some with their individual servings and their forks. Eh. Nobody was watching. Hafidha winced as she sat back down in her chair; she might have taken the other side of the couch, but it was *her* chair. Wouldn't do to set precedents around here.

"What'd Dad want, then?" Chaz asked around a mouthful when they were all tucked in, when the sound of chewing and CPU fans got a little too stifling.

"Good old-fashioned thinning out the herd," she said, and remembered her files.

She turned around, aimed a few clicks, her plate shifted to the top tier of her desk. Cecily Marshall and Gabriela Carvalho de Santos: no recent hospital visits, no whisper of police involvement, no trace with any counselling office within county lines. There had been school board-provided counselling for Miss Cecily after Gabriela died, but she hadn't continued. But there had been school board-provided counselling for *everyone* after Gabriela died.

No leads.

"Hmph," she said, and her chest loosened. *Maybe a normal case after all. Nothing strange. Nothing new.* Not evolving.

"Hmph is how the camel got his hump," Duke observed, and she circled back to face them.

"They're both clean. Both girls; well, the first is cleaner than the second, but there's nothing to make the second any more of a special snowflake than anyone else in that high school. Either we have victims here, not gammas," she said, and watched Chaz's eyes deliberately not close, his chin not turn away.

"Or?"

"Or they honestly just starved themselves to death," she said, and took a vengeful little bite of kitfo.

Chaz's face was cool and still. *Yeah, little bro,* she thought, sent it out to him. People doing it on purpose. People refusing food. It was enough to make you want to smack a person.

Not our suspects, she tapped out on her keyboard, addressed to Reyes, Falkner. Attached the files. *Our victims.*

Hit send.

The map glowed on her second monitor. She tapped it to keep it off the screen saver. Food first; calories first, each one careful and hoarded and

precious and needed. The red dots stared at her. She stared back.

Somewhere in that haystack was a regular ol' garden-variety gamma, and she knew how to hunt gammas.

*

Hyannis, MA, August 26, 2008

The Marshall house was not a shivah.

The food had been eaten, the respects paid, and then, unlike a shivah house, everyone had gone home with prayers unspoken. But it had that sense of aftermath. The house was all hasty assembly: tables pushed to the walls to accommodate food and drink, chairs and chairs brought from every room and the neighbours and down the street, littering tufts of napkins. Tears. Voices to drive out the silence.

Falkner and Worth let themselves in quietly, Lau peeling off to have a few quiet words with Detective Bradford, stationed stiff and unwilling by the door. Keeping local PD in the loop, Falkner noted. Good policy.

Brady joined her, a step back and to the right, attentive, present. Getting in for a chance to talk shop with local PD: *I was a cop before I joined the Bureau, Dallas PD. What's it like in your town?*

She was blessed in her team. It was good to remember that.

She made her way through the rose-tiled hallway, past stairs leading up into darkness and privacy so explicit no sign or gate was needed, and took a sharp turn to the right into the plush moss-green carpeting of the living room. The folding chairs were wedged between stylish black leather couches. There were both family photos and heavy-framed, numbered Japanese drawings on the walls. A well-dressed woman was holding the mother's hand, and another was collapsing down the folding chairs softly, with a creak and a *snick,* tears peeking at the corners of her eyes.

Falkner looked back. Worth was at her shoulder. They'd lost Reyes: he was disappearing down the hallway towards the sound of a television blaring. She watched after him a moment; on the television, a little blonde girl in a bright pink tutu bounced on a stage that was recognizably the same hallway landing, draped in what was probably supposed to have been her curtain. "Ooh, honey honey, you are my candy *giiiirl*" she sang, rising up into that

toddler shriek, and Falkner could hear the sound of sniffling underscoring it like static amongst the laughter and clapping of thirteen years before.

Worth threw her a question with her eyes. *No,* Falkner shook her head. Reyes was about to initiate a Man-To-Man Conversation. Stick to the mother. Focus.

They navigated between the glass-topped coffee table and the scattered, abandoned seats to the large couch at the other end, where the mother and her comforter sat beneath a policeman's watchful eye. Her hair was clean, Falkner noted. Someone had made her wash her hair for her daughter's funeral.

"Mrs. Marshall," she said, gently. The woman didn't look up and she didn't repeat herself. "Esther Falkner and Daphne Worth. We're with the FBI."

The one holding the mother's hand studied them; they were close enough in the shape of the chin, in the way they huddled against each other, for Falkner to peg them as sisters. With that sharp eye, Falkner guessed this was the one who'd made Allison Marshall wash her hair. "What do you want here?" she snapped, and the officer standing by them put a hand on her shoulder; "Come on, Alex."

The sister -- Alex; yes, they had to be sisters with that chin and the names matching in that cutesy way parents just loved, even forty years ago -- shook it off with one quick jerk. Allison Marshall didn't even look up.

Lie to them, she told herself. Any means necessary to prevent a panic. Also: *spare her the pain.*

"Young people sometimes form clusters this way," she said, speaking soft and comforting. "They imitate each other, dieting or depression. Hurting themselves." A sharp intake of breath. The aunt, not the mother. "We were called in by your local PD to make sure that's not what's happening here."

"I know what a suicide cluster is," Allison Marshall said from beneath her hanging hair, sharp and wounded. She was blonde too, but darker. Falkner wondered if Cecily's hair would have darkened as well, had she grown older. "Cecily didn't--"

"I know," Falkner said, quick, not too quick to show just how defensive, breathless she felt. She had never done this part of the job before Rebekah

was born. She had never learned how to not see her own child. "We went to the hospital and saw the records--" you never said *autopsy,* not this fresh "--and that's not what the doctors agreed happened."

"You're here to snoop around and see if her own mother was starving her," Alex the sister snapped. Falkner gauged that sharp eye once again; protectiveness and grief. Grieving, and spoiling for a fight. She flipped back reddish-blond hair with a huff. "That's what this is all about, goddamned Will Bradford going around saying Allison did that--"

Worth drew in a breath, and opened up her posture in case goddamned Will Bradford came charging around the door.

Esther Falkner was blessed in her team. He didn't.

"Alex," Mrs. Marshall said, indistinct. Tired. "It doesn't matter now."

It didn't. Her child was dead.

This woman was not a gamma.

Falkner sat down -- and the folding chair took her weight badly, twinged three separate things in her lower back -- rested her elbows on her knees, reached out and took Mrs. Marshall's hands in her own. "Tell us," she said.

Allison Marshall's hands were damp and warm. They pulled back, and then convulsive, tightened.

She told them.

Cecily was a good girl. She didn't get into trouble (said in a way that made Falkner suspect there was a sister or brother or cousin, one who did, one who wasn't). She got good grades and so what if she was a little quiet? You couldn't force a kid into a mold; you had to let them be who they were.

You did, Falkner agreed, and held the woman's hands and listened.

Cecily Marshall was quiet. Her teachers dubbed her smart but *could participate more in class discussions.* There had been a bullying problem in middle school, but it seemed to have died down. She had her small group of friends and they stuck together, and when she'd started losing weight her mother had thought it was just the baby fat coming off and the summer and the way they were all running about to the beach all the time instead of

sitting eight hours a day in a classroom. Maybe paying more attention to her figure. Something innocuous.

Something.

"When did she start losing weight?" Worth asked from the side, still standing -- and a little awkwardly, shut out as she was from that circle of created intimacy: older women with teenage girls who were dedicatedly turning the rest of their hair white.

Allison Marshall shook her head, distracted, upset. Upset that she couldn't remember right. "Earlier this summer? End of May, beginning of June?"

"Before her friend Gabriela died?" Falkner asked.

"Before," Allison Marshall said. Her hands fluttered, pulled away from Falkner's. *I should have known it to the hour,* said her face.

Worth crouched down too, a stable athlete's squat, notebook in hand. "Can you tell us who she was spending time with around then? Her regular friends? Anyone new?"

"Her regular friends," Mrs. Marshall said even fainter. Glanced up at her sister, mouth tight. "Her cousin."

Worth smiled gravely, reassuringly, and began to take down names.

Falkner withdrew; the moss-green carpet was springing back slowly into shape from its ceaseless trampling that afternoon and the kitchen, when she entered, was compact and modern and silent, littered with catering trays and dirty glasses. A neighbour washed up slowly by the sink, looking up and then quickly down again as Falkner wandered in, apologized, kept moving through.

Reyes was finishing up in the family room. The television wasn't off, but muted; the video shook a little as three-year-old Cecily waved scavenged ribbons about and grinned and bowed. She was a cute kid. A little chubby. Baby fat.

"Mr. Marshall," Reyes paused as she came in. "This is SSA Falkner."

She shook his hand, professional and strong. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Marshall," she said, and let go. His grip was strong too, almost spitefully so. He was a

thin man, lanky bones and thick brown hair and his dress shirt half-unbuttoned. His eyes were red.

"Aren't you supposed to be chasing serial killers or something?" he asked. Unlike his sister-in-law, there was no power left in it.

Reyes' face set in a flat, strange line that nobody but Falkner would recognize as terrible, suppressed laughter. "Sometimes we help little girls too," he said, and continued taking down the list of names.

*

At fourteen, Rebekah Falkner had decided that she wanted to be called Bekk, the two k's specified and sometimes audible in her pronunciation. Her mother honourably tried to remember this, and thus was--temporarily--ahead in the Good Parent/Bad Parent game. Ben couldn't seem to train himself out of Beckie, which got him at best a fourteen year old eyeroll and exasperated "Daa-ad."

So Falkner was careful, when Rebekah took the phone that evening, to remember to start with her best foot forward. "Bekk, tell me what happened at the mall yesterday?"

Silence. Rebekah was not a silent kid.

Victim silence, she thought, for one terrible moment, before she took a deep breath and laid down a river in her head between her case and her child.

"Penguin?" she said, tentatively. Silly old baby-nickname. The kid had looked like one in the ultrasound, squished and floppy in black and white. She'd grown out of wanting to be called that by ten.

It worked.

"Fucking Tonya Preston dropped this shit down the back of my shirt," she muttered. Barely audible. "I came home. Deborah called Dad."

Falkner didn't say word one about the swearing.

"Are you okay?" she asked instead, gentle and probing. Her free hand bunched in her once-creased pants. It was the end of the day in a slightly run-down paisley-carpeted replicable chain hotel, a hotel that could be anywhere in America, except anywhere in America it wasn't the last week of summer in Cape Cod and they would have found rooms in a better hotel.

Worth had excused herself to Lau's room the second Falkner had picked up the phone. The only other sound was the air conditioning.

She relaxed the fist automatically, started to smooth out her pants, then stopped. End of the day. It didn't matter if her pants wrinkled up now.

"Yeah," Rebekah muttered. Falkner held silent. And then her daughter made a little hiccupping cough, an odd animal noise. "No."

"Oh, sweetheart," she said without thinking, and choked it back. No crying. No kicking herself over not being there, because now she was here, and that was just how it was. And no being or saying anything but strength, because teenaged and prickly or not, her little girl needed something to hold on to.

"Listen," she said, firm and careful, closing her eyes to better be there, not be here. "I'm proud of how you handled yourself. You got yourself out of a situation you weren't happy with." A pause. "I'd prefer if next time you'd give us a call instead of taking matters into your own hands with the transit."

"I'm fourteen years old, Mom," she said. Snippy. No telling if she was snippy about the implied insult or the things she didn't want to talk about with her mother, but God knew her *fourteen years old* sounded so different, worlds away, from what that meant to her mother.

"You are," she said, neutrally. "And we care about you, and like to know that you're safe and happy."

"Okay," Rebekah muttered. She didn't exactly sound chastised. But she got the message, Falkner thought.

"I love you," she said. Let out a breath.

"When are you coming home?" Rebekah said suddenly, and her eyes came open again, with all that new calm crumbled.

"I don't know yet, sweetheart," she said carefully. "Soon."

Soon.

Once the downstairs extension was safely hung up she let the hand uncurl from her pant leg for real. "How's she doing?" she asked Ben. He would be in their bedroom now. She visualized it; called out the smell of his shampoo from a scent-memory that would be faded in just a few days.

He whuffed out a breath. His eyes were probably tired. They had lines at the corners that she liked to trace with one finger when he was half-asleep. "Stewing. Stayed in her room all afternoon with the music up loud. I'd be worried if she wasn't making a show of it, you know. Teenagers are resilient."

To a point, she thought.

"She's angry," he continued. "And she's gonna be for a while. But I can't fault that."

"No," Falkner replied softly. She was angry too. And unfortunately -- or fortunately -- grown adults against capricious fourteen-year-old girls being wicked in the ways only teenagers could wasn't considered fair play in any of the fifty states. "You have a chance to talk to the parents?"

"Yeah," he said. And now, he was angry too. "I don't know how far we'll get with them. Kids will be kids and harmless joke and all that bullshit."

Her back was starting to throb. She counted to three and let out a slow breath, bent over at the waist to stretch the muscles out. It wasn't working. Nothing to do about it.

Too much in life like that. Nothing to do.

"Maybe we can do one better when I get back," she said quietly. "Hey, I'm sure they've been late with their taxes once."

Ben snorted. "Yes, J. Eddie."

He wasn't angry at her. Maybe it would have been easier if he got angry about it: Ben stayed home with the girls while she was out getting shot at, and that was the deal, and that had been the deal long enough that neither of them questioned it anymore. But neither of them were especial believers in easy solutions, and so even if he was angry sometimes, he didn't *get* angry.

"Goodnight," she said. *I love you. Thank you. Thank you thank you.*

He knew.

"Goodnight, Es," he replied, and she held on to the phone as the line clicked and died.

She'd turned down her bed before going to call Ben -- old habit, army habit -- and it was ready to slide into when she tucked her cellphone onto the scratched mass-produced nightstand, took out her earrings, braided back her hair and finished up in the washroom. Worth was back when she emerged with clean teeth and in pajamas; profilers tended to know when they were wanted, when they could come back in.

"Wakeup call's set for seven," Worth said, and she nodded. Her usual was six, but there wasn't a whole lot they could do before the records offices opened, places of work and home addresses were traced, and people were available and ready to let officers of the law inside.

Worth was flopped on the other bed -- double occupancy on the government dime, and especially in Cape Cod in the last week of summer -- and shut her book as Falkner eased herself under a washed-out pastel floral bedspread. Deliberately washed out, she guessed. Kind of like distressed jeans. Worth tucked the book back into her go bag. None of the team ever really made themselves comfortable in a hotel room. She reached for the lamp switch and clicked it; hesitated.

"This one won't take long," Worth said, her back to Falkner's cramped double bed, averting her eyes by the neat expedient of getting herself tucked under the hotel blankets. "Right?"

Falkner took a breath, let it out. *Soon.* For all their hectic organization, they'd almost overlooked it. Worth was getting married in ten days.

She and Ben had done it quietly; there had been no caterers, final fittings, decorators, or theme-coloured invitations, just a backyard and a tent and a whole lot of potluck. Not everyone did it that way, though.

"I don't know," Falkner said. If it ran long, she'd send Worth home, she decided. They could work this case with four, or fly in Todd if they really needed to. Chaz was enough on the mend to handle the paperwork end of things. They'd manage. "I'm hoping not." A pause. "We'll get you home in plenty of time."

"Thank you," Worth said, muffled, and yes, they should have left her at home.

She reached over and turned off her own lamp. The dark swam and resolved into ceiling, drapes, a stain of light spread from the place those drapes didn't

meet. It looked like the profiles of two dead girls and one living. Falkner shut her eyes with a sigh. She needed to get some sleep.

"Ah," Worth's voice came tentative from the other bed. Falkner rolled over, opened her eyes. "I...well. How do you handle it?"

Falkner's back went stiff with the surprise. She propped herself on an elbow, thought about relaxing it, muscle by muscle. "Handle which?"

"Being away," Worth said, after a pause. "And the family."

Ah.

Falkner let herself back down onto her back, tugged up the blanket. She was very aware that hers was the only marriage in recorded history that had managed to survive Shadow Unit. A couple of Reyes's seemed to have seen the whole idea coming and run the other way up to a decade earlier.

"It's different when you're married," she said, staring at the freckles of plaster on the ceiling. It was hard to quantify how. The days when she and Ben had lived on takeout and block-and-board furniture in a badly-kept DC apartment were muzzy, worn unreal by too many breakfasts and Sundays and birthday parties between. "Easier. You...draw agreements up between yourselves, and you pay it back when you're there." Do the dishes. Arrange the day trips to museums, lunch in the park with the girls, actively spend time. Let it equal out in the mix of things, like it always did if you trusted each other enough. "Easier and harder in some ways. Especially if you're having children."

Worth's startle of surprise was utterly silent.

"We haven't thought about that," she said, after a moment. Cautious. Still guarded.

"Well," Falkner replied, half-apology, to the dark. "You have time."

"Time would be the problem," Daphne Worth said, not quite as hesitant as a fourteen-year-old girl, but near enough. "I haven't known if I'll be on time for a date for over a year."

"You have to change what on time means," Falkner said, and rolled over to face the window, turned away. "You make on time be when you're there."

Worth was silent.

The beds, at least, were good. They didn't squeak when Worth finally rolled over, and through the window, like a buzz of white noise, Falkner could hear the ocean. Smell it, too. Different from the Mississippi, she noted, but sort of the same. Wet and fresh.

Eventually each figured the other was sleeping. Eventually, they were.

*

Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore, MD, August 26, 2008

Madeline Frost rarely used a fax machine. They were messy and imprecise, smudgy. They eradicated the subtleties of a photograph, or better yet, real flesh. But a fax machine was all that the Cape Cod Hospital was willing to use, and they would not send the body.

She supposed she understood. The longer the girl stayed unburied, the longer facts must be faced. Forgetting happened better with a good six feet of dirt.

People didn't, not sincerely, want to know.

While she fancied herself not like that -- and that was why she took the work with the Anomalous Crimes Task Force, and that was why she quietly fleshed out her private, locked-away files with every gamma corpse Stephen Reyes was able to ship home and suffered what small intrusion a specially-issued security clearance inserted into her daily life -- that too was a danger. Complacency, she noted. Complacency was the number one cause of death.

So she made do with the faxes of this Meadowvale's inferior autopsy and did not press the issue.

And it was decidedly inferior.

Bloodwork, yes. And they had cut her open, and examined the heart and kidneys and liver, in a charming, cursory way. Beyond the weight and shallow condition, the presiding doctor had averted his eye; there were few tests ordered. He had not opened the skull.

Complacency, and the desire truly, deep down, not to know.

Madeline Frost picked up the receiver of her heavy white rotary telephone and dialled Stephen Reyes's number.

(She knew they disliked contacting her. Disliked coming into her dissection room yet more. She was not in the habit of cultivating illusions.)

Agent Reyes was not picking up his phone. A bad habit in a federal agent, but all the better. It was much preferable to deal with the answering service.

"This is Madeline Frost." She spoke precisely into the machine. Precision right off was preferable to correction later. "I received your materials this afternoon. In the absence of the body--" they had earned a small rebuke "--I can only judge the autopsy as reported, and as reported, it is incomplete and inadequate. I cannot ascertain from these findings whether the subject displayed the usual markers." She paused. "You may wish to inquire with the presiding doctor as to why he did not perform a toxicology exam, order genetic tests, or inspect the brain."

Hopefully they would find another body for her soon.

Madeline Frost replaced the receiver and washed her hands mechanically; toweled them off and tugged two nitrile gloves from a half-full box with her disinfected thumb and finger. It was only midnight, and there was work to do yet.

Act III

Ashton, VA, October 8, 2008

They had warned Virginia Greenwood not to touch her daughter.

Falkner had not had to do that. Reyes had handled the phone call and the paperwork, working heads-together with Doctor Ramachandran in that silent way of theirs that suggested a long and not always agreeable association. Susannah's manifestation was catalogued and confined, its byways mapped and its mythologies -- like simple, human touch -- committed to paper, but they did not know how volatile it was. It might lash out. It was possible it could never be sated.

Reyes had explained this thing to the Greenwoods in language they could handle once, twice, and with a reminder right before the visit.

Virginia Greenwood ignored him.

"Susie," she gasped as the door shut behind them, breath kicked out of her, and rushed to fold her daughter in her arms.

Reyes started forward and Falkner moved to lay a hand on his sleeve; changed her mind and just held up the hand. Three marriages, but Reyes didn't have any children. He wouldn't understand that the thing inside Susannah, the danger of touching it skin to skin, was nothing but an inconvenient detail.

Susannah stiffened when her mother touched her, pulled back; was met by her father on the other side, more awkward but still aching to hold his only child after two months without.

Virginia Greenwood noticed. There was no *not* noticing. "Susie," she said, stern and hoarse.

Behind Falkner's arm, Reyes subsided.

Susannah Greenwood leaned her head on her mother's shoulder and let out a long breath.

They should not have been witnessing this; there was no call for anyone to witness this, not in person, not on the camera that was embedded discreetly in the corner of Susannah Greenwood's tiny world. But in this facility, Susannah Greenwood was a patient and they were consultants to her doctor; they were federal officers and her parents were civilians.

Her parents were civilians and she was an incarcerated felon and they were her arresting officers.

"It's okay," Susannah Greenwood told her doctor with a bit of that teenage asperity. "I ate lunch. Seconds."

Dr. Ramachandran's eyebrow lifted, but to his credit his voice stayed patient and kind. "We don't know if that makes a difference, Susannah."

"Of course it does," she said, and her father blinked at her, hurt and confused. Unable to apprehend his daughter's familiarity, that sighing, impatient, horrifically normal teenage irritation directed at her jailer.

"You know what we're here for, right?" her father said, and she nodded. Dr. Ramachandran had briefed her, just as he'd briefed her parents before they scheduled the long drive up highways that got narrower and narrower to Idlewood. Whatever form Susannah Greenwood's manifestation of the anomaly had taken, it had left her relatively lucid; she wasn't plotting like Clemson McCain or turned sadistic like Saito or schizophrenic like Jessica

Kelly. Dr. Ramachandran hadn't theorized why. Brady had taken it as a firm conviction that the eventual nasty streak just hadn't yet cooked through. But Falkner, in her quieter moments, assumed that if the anomaly fed upon suffering, Susannah Greenwood's own was sufficient meat for it.

The girl leaned in her mother's arms, and her father held her hand, and for once Stephen Reyes looked uncomfortable and awkward and lost in this little room, his feet washed with the edges of someone else's desperate familial affection. Ramachandran glanced over at them, questioning. He had the clipboard in hand with the papers. *How do you want this to go?*

"Don't worry," Falkner said quietly. "We have no further appointments today."

*

Hyannis, MA, August 27, 2008

Stephen Reyes rose unhappy into the bright Atlantic sun and the sound of waves chattering off the beaches of Cape Cod with two voicemail messages on his cellphone. He listened to them both twice through, meticulous as always, as he looked out the window and took in the peninsular view. Then he took his shower and dressed, and joined his team for breakfast yet unhappier.

"There has been an issue," he said as he took his seat at the small breakfast table in the hotel dining room, and a silence radiated out to the four other chairs before the napkin landed upon his lap. They all looked well-rested; not a hair out of place on either Lau or Brady's heads, and Worth was only slightly rumpled by the overharsh air conditioning, not full-on askew. Good. Sleep was important in handling a setback. So was poise.

"Dr. Frost went through the autopsy report last night for us," he said, pausing to pick up a menu and skim down it shallowly. All hotel menus were fundamentally the same after a while; continental breakfast and a variety of carbs, all overpriced according to an exact formula balancing naturally occurring outrage with the traveler's inborn reluctance to go driving around hunting for something better. "There were several tests and procedural items that Dr. Meadowvale neglected to perform." He didn't bother listening for the reactions; they could have a minute to let that sink in. Stephen Reyes was unhappy, and being hungry would only make him unhappier.

He let a harried-looking waitress in a black uniform designed for someone with both more chest and less waist take his order: bacon, two eggs over easy, toast whole-wheat-not-white, what assorted fruit they had, and, since he'd forgotten his battered Celestial Seasonings travel tin with its five bags of Upton lapsang souchong back in D.C., whatever tea they had that wasn't orange pekoe. Which, he was informed, was nothing; it was Lipton, chamomile, or mint. So: "Coffee," he said, and tried not to grit his teeth.

When he gave his attention back to his team Lau was tidying her plate meticulously. Brady's fork and knife were splayed out to either side where he had suddenly put them down, the knife clean and reflecting sunlight, and both Falkner and Worth had tight, bothered looks on their faces.

"So we're going back to the hospital," Falkner said, as if it were a detour to the supermarket.

"We are going back to the hospital," Reyes confirmed. His head ached. Some hotels put a pitcher of coffee on the table for large groups. Some stocked Bigelow or, God help, even Tazo. "And we are going to choose an approach for that before we leave."

"So he screwed up the autopsy and panicked?" Lau said simply.

"Maybe not." Brady sat back in his chair. They were short-backed. His shoulders cleared the faux-wrought iron top by two inches. "Meadowvale's well-off. Not a young guy. Probably semi-retired here. This isn't a big place for bodies, so he gets to live in a nice house, hang around with rich people, go into work once a week to sign a death certificate and spend the rest of the time on the beach."

Overstating the case, Reyes thought grimly, toying with a packet of sugar from the centre of the table, and nodded. "Go on."

"So he starts seeing something he doesn't like, something he doesn't understand. And then the FBI's called in."

"And that nice life flashes before his eyes," Lau finished.

"And he throws the parents under the bus for that?" Worth argued. "Like that wouldn't disturb his quiet life when the rest of the town found out."

Lau pressed her lips together for an instant, hands steepled and elbows at rest on the pastel tablecloth, and Reyes could see it click. "Who says they find

out?" she said. "It's Bradford's fault for calling those out-of-town federal types in. It's those federal types who barge into town and call--" her voice roughened "--our good honest hardworking folk child-killers. And he doesn't have the evidence for it, right?"

"It gets thrown out of court," Brady murmured. "Or Bradford, either because he's smart enough to know better or his boss is, doesn't press the charges. Meadowvale was just doing his duty."

"And everyone's life goes on," Falkner concluded quietly from her corner, arms crossed.

The coffee came, hot and acerbic. Reyes emptied two sugars into it with crisp, desperate efficiency and took a long pull from the mug. Counted backwards from ten, and by three his head felt clearer. The food was not long behind it. He dug into his breakfast, unselfconscious; he'd learned how to eat despite everyone else watching from a multiplicity of police stations, interview rooms, and the last six months of his second marriage.

"So we will be revisiting Dr. Meadowvale," Reyes said after three mouthfuls of egg and two of bacon. The bacon was overcrisp. "Falkner and I."

She inclined her head in a nod. Senior agents meant authority meant firepower meant trouble. The other three were too young to call an older man on the carpet that way. You needed a bit of grey in your hair, sometimes.

"The second thing," he said, mopping a nothing bit of grease from his mouth with the polyester napkin, "is that Hafidha has given us a shortlist of people to look at. Lau, Brady, Worth; you'll be paying some visits today."

"People?" Brady asked.

"A dozen who fit the possible profile," he said and tilted his coffee mug. Almost empty. "It's imperfect. We have no psychological histories for most of them. Cold calls and use your judgment."

"Most people don't have psychological histories until they flip out," Brady said, offhand.

Lau glanced at Brady. There was a sour twist to his smile that Reyes distrusted. "The term is 'convert'," he corrected, and located a proper marmalade for his toast. His mother had always managed to get things like

mebos or chutney or spicy preserves from the Mexican or rare South African groceries, and he had never got the habit of chemically sweet commercial jams.

Falkner twitched an eyebrow at him and flagged down a waiter for more coffee.

Lau stepped in, automatic peacemaker. "If the autopsy's no good we should consider the medical records."

"We should," Reyes agreed. "Call Hafidha for them before we go. There's no reason to assume cooperation from the hospital after we accuse their staff of negligence."

Worth shifted in her chair. Her plate was spotted with toast crusts. "What about HIPAA? Is that ethical?"

Question with a fixed answer, no prevarication; not *we can't do that* but *is that ethical*. He was raising them right after all.

"No," replied Falkner after a moment, "but they're both past suffering for it."

Worth watched her for a long moment and then nodded. Two buttons on her cellphone and she was saying: "Hafs?", and Reyes raised one hand, casual and authoritative, for the cheque.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2008

Hafidha was about to lay down the equivalent of an Amber Alert by the time Chaz showed up at work that afternoon. It was one in the afternoon and she'd gone from sleeping in to dropping out to images of that little duct-tape-and-cardboard car of his turned over in a ditch all before eleven.

"Where the *hell* have you been?" she asked, hands shaking, out of her chair. "I ask this with all goddamned love."

He just stood in her doorway -- no, leaned. He was shaking a little himself.

"Chaz," she said, stopped short. Afraid again, for just a little second.

"Three-month test came back clean," he said, with a tight, contained smile, and by the time Duke came to see what the ruckus was about, she was at her keyboard and he was face-deep in the files, both pretending not to hope.

*

Hyannis, MA, August 27, 2008

Nicolette Lau was used to rooms full of cameras, flashing lights, angry police officers. She still hadn't picked up the habit of just ringing someone's doorbell.

"Girl," Daniel Brady muttered at her when she hesitated, out the corner of one perfectly composed, laid-back, good-old-boy smile. Worth raised an eyebrow. Lau took a memo to put something fragrant under his pillow tonight and pressed the glowing round button.

They had fancy doorbells in Hyannis. It tinkled three bars of Pachlebel's Canon in D in a tinny, electronic voice, and they repeated twice before the door was opened by a slight, skinny teenager in cut-off jean shorts and a bulky tee-shirt, blonde hair back in a ponytail, squinting up past sharp cheeks at them and the morning sun.

Thin, Lau thought. But not enough to tell if that was natural or by misadventure.

So: "Hi there," she said, turning on a smile. "Are your parents home?"

The kid frowned; Lau could almost see her deciding on a tactic. "They're busy at the moment," she said, automatic and polite. Good, Lau thought. Not home after all, but they've taught her not to say that to strangers. "Can I help you?"

Lau slipped a card into her hand and launched into her canned interview request speech. *We're from the government and we're here to help you. Call back for an appointment, please?*

The girl listened gravely, suspicious, one hand still on the doorknob and ready to push. When Lau held out the card, she took it between the tips of two fingers, careful not to brush Lau's hand.

For a second Lau weighed whether it was worth being offended. Looked again; the kid was generally self-contained, holding herself narrowly behind the cracked-open door. She had the other arm wrapped around her torso, hand tucked behind the opposite side of her waist; holding herself in. Or somehow, even in this kind of sharp beachside heat, chilly.

The air coming out through the door wasn't cold. The hallway -- what she could see of it -- was tidy and in good repair, with its doormat worn but not worn out, well-used beach shoes lined tidily in a faux-cast iron rack to its right, a potted palm drooping lazily somewhere behind. No reason for this kid to be cold or afraid.

Something wrong here.

"We'll try back," she finished; her mouth was moving automatically. She didn't need her head focused to deliver a set script anymore. "In the meantime, let your parents know we came by? They can call us anytime."

"Yeah," the kid said, faint.

She paused. "You call us if you need anything too," she said, and noted the way the girl's eyes went bigger before she shut the door.

They got back in the car and were belted up again before Lau opened her mouth. "She look thin to you?"

"Yeah," Worth said, clipped. "And suspicious of The Fuzz."

"Looked well off enough to be eating three meals a day, in any case," Brady said. Lau turned to him and nodded; he'd caught the same things, probably more. Danny Brady had an exquisite sense of annual income.

He also knew enough to know that, sometimes, that didn't matter.

"Let's write it down," Lau replied, and turned the key in the ignition. The next house was just a few blocks away. They could have walked the whole route, honestly, but it was brassy August hot even for a California girl, and they had an image to maintain.

The doorbell at their next stop was just a plain chime, and this time she made Brady push the button and stand point at the door. "Girl," she dubbed him when he gave her a questioning glance, and a corner of his mouth quirked as he pushed the glowing white button.

The woman who opened the door was small and round and Hispanic, middle-aged, comfortable-looking in cotton capri pants and an old cartoon lobster tee-shirt. "Can I help you?" she asked in that drawn-out local accent that Lau still couldn't quite get her head around no matter how many times they worked out East.

Lau and Brady already had their badges out, though it looked like this time he'd beaten her out for Fastest Draw From the West. "I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau. We're with the FBI, Ma'am," Lau said; a lot of people felt safer talking to a Nonthreatening Asian Woman than six-feet-something of Danny Brady. Still, the nice lady's face closed off. "We're just speaking to people who knew Cecily Marshall."

We are not here to arrest you, she tried to beam into the woman's head, and after a moment, that deathgrip on the front door did relax. "Because of the police investigation," she said.

"Yes," Worth told her from behind, and repeated the short explanation about suicide clusters and prevention and a conscientious local police department that was going to be the only way to conduct this case without being run out of town on a rail.

The woman -- Consuela Ferreira, but-call-me-Connie -- let them in, sat them down in a living room decorated in plush and florals and dark wood, and offered them fresh iced tea.

The iced tea was good; mint and not too much sugar. It also gave Connie Ferreira time to discreetly flag her husband down and throw him at her guests. He came in through the screen door a little sweatier than his wife, hair back in a tidy bandana: they'd been weeding what Lau would call more of a full-scale backyard farm rather than a garden. The tops of beanpoles poked up behind a thicket of tomato plants, and there was more where that came from. She gave a little whistle despite herself, and David Albrecht smiled as he snicked his screen door shut. "Organic and all-natural. Haven't paid for vegetables in two years." And just like that, his shoulders were down, his manner easy. Some kinds of pride trumped having the cops in your kitchen.

She smiled back. Rapport, as instant and easy as breathing. "You'll have to show me around when we're done," she said, for once meaning it.

"Sure thing," he said, and followed his wife to the living room, where she gestured for them to sit down. "What can we help you with?"

Worth was studiously examining her iced tea glass in two-gulp increments and not available for comment. Brady -- his doorbell, after all -- lifted an eyebrow, tiny. *Your rapport, cowpoke.* Lau sighed inside and tried to pump

extra reassurance into her smile. "Your daughter was friends with Cecily Marshall and Gabriela Carvalho de Santos," she said.

Connie Ferreira took a long draw from her glass. "They had classes together, went to the same primary school. The girls played at the Marshalls' a lot." Her hands were tight. She was holding that glass like this was Death Valley and it was her very last Evian.

Jackpot, Nicolette Lau's investigatory senses told her.

"Who else stuck to that group? Any other kids?" Worth asked, apparently having surfaced for air. The glass was empty, and there was a trickle of sweat sneaking down the back of her jaw.

"Marissa Tobin, during the summers. That's Cecily's cousin," Connie said, eyes cast upwards in that way that meant remembering. "Susie Greenwood down the road. Kevin Cheung and Avi Liederman."

"He's not been over for a while now," her husband put in. He'd leaned forward some, elbows settled on his knees; the stunning blow of garden-flattery was clearly wearing off. "Can I ask why you're asking?"

"We're investigating the circumstances of Cecily Marshall's death," Brady said.

"Investigating teenaged girls?"

Get offa my rapport, Lau thought, and kicked in: "We do a lot of interviews in an investigation. It's very important to have context."

"Who Cecily and Gabriela's friends were; what was going on in their lives," Worth added in over the rim of her glass.

Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht's parents shared a look away from them, the kind of silent consultation that only worked if you'd lived near twenty years together or worked at least three messy murder cases. "Well," Connie said, "that's something you'd have to ask her."

Not a lot surprised Nicolette Lau. She cared to pretend a lot less surprised her than actually did, but nonetheless. "You're sure you're comfortable with her giving us an interview?"

There was a twitch of hesitation. Only a twitch. "She's old enough," Connie said, and Brady shifted in his chair somewhere behind.

Albrecht tilted his head back, pitched his voice up the stairs. "Juli?"

The answering "Yeah?" was faint, muffled by at least one closed door. Connie Ferreira's eyes lifted skyward for a moment, when she thought Lau wasn't looking. Lau caught it, and then to her credit, Connie Ferreira caught *her,* and they shared a brief smile.

Worth and Brady shared a glance too, but they didn't smile.

"Come down a sec?" David Albrecht said.

Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht stumped down the steps in the classic teenaged elephant-walk way, the over-heavy clatter of someone who woke up one day to find their usual body gone and didn't quite know how to make the new one work yet. She arrived bare feet first, thin and long-toed and brown, the kind that hadn't been too encumbered by shoes too young.

Lau could see the bones in her legs before she made it down the stairs.

She didn't have to catch Worth's eye. Worth was already watching, the glass set aside and out of the way, and her hands were pressed to the armrests of the Ferreira-Albrechts' nice stuffed chair, ready to move.

Juliana was wearing a sweater, wrapped almost twice around her chest; the bulk obscured the rest of her, the ribs and arms and all the way down to the knees. Her collarbones stuck out. They stuck out too much.

Her mother frowned a bit. "Anjinho, you're cold?"

"Air conditioning's high in my room," she said, a nice voice. Thin, but nice.

Lau tucked away a frown of her own. Heat rose, not cold, and the glass in her hand was sweating.

Connie Ferreira briefly laid a hand on her daughter's forehead, shook her head. "Juli, there's some people here from the FBI to ask about Cecily."

The sweater went around her tighter. She did everything but flinch.

Lau stood up, offered a hand, curving her arm gentle and not sharp. "Hi, Juliana. I'm Nikki, and this is Daniel and Daphne. We just want to ask you a few questions about how your friend was doing, if she was upset about anything."

"She didn't kill herself," Juliana said, muffled, and declined to take the hand.

"We know," Lau replied, unruffled and solid. The trick with suspects, victims, and teenagers most of all was to never let them undermine the mountain of your calm. "But we need to ask people about what was going on with her in the days before she died, so we know properly what happened."

"Because you think her parents hurt her," she said. Arms crossed over the sweater.

"Because we want to know," Lau replied, and waited a few seconds. Juliana's mother patted her back encouragingly. It matched well with that warning glare. "Your parents said you were friends with both Cecily and Gabriela."

"Yeah," she said, looking up finally, finally getting irked at how Lau's measured voice kept picking words more for a child of ten than sixteen. Good. If kindness didn't draw a person out, irritation could do the trick.

"Did anything change with them this summer?" she asked. "Think back for me; were they eating differently, talking more about certain things, not talking about others anymore?"

The mention of not talking would have put an adult on guard; minding their own reactions, rearranging their hands into what, you learned, their mother taught them was best polite behaviour. But most kids -- kids brought up safe, kids brought up in loving and stable homes -- didn't have that skill yet. Juliana's face closed up for the season two exact seconds after the word *eating.*

"They changed how they ate?" she asked, keeping her voice soft. "Did they do it on purpose?"

At the edges of her vision, she could see Connie's hand still rubbing her daughter's back, distracted. "Juli," she said, quietly. The kid trembled.

"It's all right," Lau said, scrunching herself down, assuming the posture of a non-threatening animal. "Go as fast or as slow as you need to."

Brady had moved to stand by the father. Worth was leaned forward, ready on the balls of her feet, arms fake-loose on her knees. All the nice, polite drinks were gone now. Outside, a bird Lau didn't know called four, five times over the sound of the sea.

The kid was breathing fast; her breath whistled between each word, in a voice that was croakier and tighter than it had been a minute before. "We were dieting," she said.

Connie's eyebrows shot up. "We? I've told you this, there's nothing wrong--"

"Con," David said, peculiarly still. And then: "C'mon. You can tell us anything, you know that."

Juliana rubbed her arms. Distracted. Far away. "We were dieting," she repeated. "So we could help each other out, but I swear that had nothing to do with it--"

"Juliana," Worth broke in carefully, standing up slow against five other startle reflexes. "Do me a favour and take a slow, deep breath?"

Connie's arm dropped from her back. Juliana breathed in, hitched, let it out.

Lau felt the saliva evaporate out of her mouth. *She's not breathing right.*

Worth was there in two strides. She had one of Juliana's hands in hers by the third, high up. *Pulse,* Lau realized. "Juliana, tell me what hurts."

"Here," she said, kind of small. Rubbed her chest in a little circle with her free hand; the hand drifted back to her arm. "It's nothing, really. Something I ate."

Oh shit, Lau thought, and dove into her pocket for her phone.

Worth looked up at the mother, the father. "Brady, open the window, and we need a bottle of aspirin here," she said, clipped and commanding. David Albrecht got up, stumbled, reached out a hand for balance.

He missed it when his daughter went down.

Lau's hands found the phone, flipped it open.

Worth caught her halfway down. Worth waved them all off, her mother and Brady who was up and moving now, and her father with one professional hand and a "Ma'am-Sir-I'm-a-trained-paramedic," and had her ear to Juliana's mouth and her hand to Juliana's chest the second her other hand rested the girl's head on the fuzzy, carpeted floor.

"Call 911," she said tersely, almost offhand, and then pulled the girl's sweater wide, packed her hands together, and began to pump.

Lau's hands were slick, wet from the iced tea glass. One more thing in the way right now, when she didn't need things in the way. She wiped them on her pants in two clean swipes and hit the necessary four buttons.

"Tell them cardiac arrest. We need a defibrillator, we need a ventilator, and we need an IV with fluids on-scene," Worth said, distant and strained and still weirdly casual, hands flat and jabbing at that tiny, ridged chest.

Something cracked.

Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht's mother gaped at her daughter's body on the floor, whispering "God, my God."

"911," said a thick voice on the other end of the phone. "What is your emergency?"

"We have a sixteen year-old girl in cardiac arrest at--" Lau dipped back into her pocket for her notebook, the address.

And then: "Seven-fifteen Martin Street," Danny Brady supplied, at her elbow. His face was like stone.

*

Falkner and Reyes had been waiting for Dr. Simon Meadowvale -- with all the coffee and delays and anxious administrators they could desire, of course -- for an hour and three minutes when the ambulance came screaming in. It was the first ambulance that had staggered up to emergency in the whole hour, and it blew into the quiet hospital offices like an autumn hurricane.

Falkner glanced at Reyes for one, two, three seconds, and then both rose and hustled down the hallways after the running teams of nurses and orderlies.

The halls of Cape Cod Hospital were not intuitive -- Falkner had deliberately mapped them in her head after the first five turns and second unlabelled door -- but the flow of people was hard to lose. It ended in the tributary of the emergency room, where a deathly thin teenaged girl was being wheeled on a stretcher through the flapping folding doors, Daphne Worth running to keep up at her side.

Lau and Brady followed in her wake, Brady's sleeves rolled up and his jacket missing. They both looked closed, blank. Exhausted.

"What happened?" Falkner got out, and as their heads turned almost in unison over to her, a couple more gazes followed.

Not here.

The nurses at the admissions desk were staring. Lau blinked, and then gathered herself up in a few dozen invisible ways and walked over to handle them with all the poise, confidence, and unflappability of a professional on working time. Brady shook his head and followed Falkner and Reyes back down the hallway, through the two unlabelled doors and around the turns, into the office where they had been left to cool their heels for one hour and five minutes, now.

Their coffee was cold. Falkner offered Brady hers anyway, and he turned it to point the slight lipstick mark away and gulped it down in three long draws. "She collapsed right in front of us," he said when he had his breath back. "Worth did CPR and compressions until the ambulance got there. We rode behind."

"How's it looking?" she asked.

Brady stole a tissue from the institutional blue box on the desk, wiped his brow with it once, twice. "Not good." It didn't so much crumple as wilt into nothing in his palm before he took another. "Worth was working on her until they got the respirator on. I think she cracked a few ribs."

Falkner couldn't help the wince. Worth would remember that; the sound of those ribs cracking. It would keep her up nights.

"Teenage girl again," Reyes said, perching on someone else's desk, and his eyebrows drew down.

"Consistent choice of victim," Falkner said.

"And it's speeding up," he replied.

He was on the phone with Gates before she could reply, muttering instructions about sample sizes and population movements and so forth into his phone with little or no regard for whatever outdated machinery might need cellphones to be off. Cape Cod General was a fairly rich hospital. There was a chance he wasn't disrupting anyone's life support.

"Our gamma's a teenage girl," Falkner said, forcing thought and thought and interconnection into something linear, something coherent. A profile. "There's no violence. This isn't about hate, or revenge; it's projection. Social conformity; they're losing weight until they die. And the girls at this age care about each other's weight a hell of a lot more than the boys ever do."

"Or anger at herself," Brady put in, subdued, turning the tissue once in his hand before he shot it smoothly into someone's wastebasket. "Projection onto people like her. Punishing them for perceived faults instead of herself."

"And women do that more than men," Falkner replied. "Turn their anger on each other."

"And turn their anger on themselves," Brady said, and then the door opened. All three of them turned; Dr. Simon Meadowvale had finally arrived for his top-of-the-morning meeting.

"Agents--" he managed before Reyes took two strides forward and planted himself inside his personal space.

"There's another teenage girl displaying the same symptoms in your ER," Reyes said, flat and even, mouth working every last inch of each syllable. "You are going to tell us why you fudged Cecily Marshall's autopsy."

He didn't even have to say *now.*

"Symptoms?" Meadowvale got out, trying his damndest not to step back. Brave at least that way, Falkner noted. You had to give him that.

"Dying of starvation," Brady put in, and Falkner saw the girders of Simon Meadowvale's newborn outrage and resolve snap.

"I don't know who you think you are, coming in here on some trumped-up charge and interrupting life-saving business to question me--"

"That is why we are questioning you," Reyes said flat and even, and pointed with one finger in the general direction of the emergency room.

"It couldn't be a disease--" Meadowvale started.

"I don't *care* if you know what it is," snapped Reyes. "I care about the truth and I care about no more dead kids in this town by Monday."

This meant Falkner was to be Good Cop. She closed her eyes and remembered the catch and stitch of Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht's breathing, two breaths total before they'd hustled her through the doors. She did not want to be the Good Cop right now. "Dr. Meadowvale," she said. "Simon."

Why did she always have to be Good Cop?

"We are not going to bring a malpractice claim against you," she said, which was true. "We're not going to bring charges." Also true. "We just need to find out what happened here."

It stabilized him. Or frightened him more; she honestly couldn't tell at this point, with his face frozen into immobility and his eyes big as they could probably get. Slap to the face with a fish, as Rebekah would say.

"I did the autopsy," he started. They always started with bald facts: *I got into the car. I left the stove on. I didn't look. I wasn't thinking.* "I started the autopsy thinking undiagnosed diabetes and a bad reaction, and they were late getting me the files. Doesn't matter; it's only supposed to prejudice what you look for. Some examiners don't read the files beforehand."

Reyes leaned back, giving him room. The doctor swallowed hard. "Go on," Falkner said.

"And then I read the files," he said. His left hand was toying with one finger of his right. Falkner shifted for a better angle. Wedding ring. "And it didn't make sense. There was no reason she should look like that, the heart be in that condition unless she'd been starved for months--"

"And she wasn't," Falkner prompted.

"I looked at her medical records. There's an obligation," he said, shooting them what was left of his squashed-out scorn, "to file a report if there's suspicion of abuse. Especially with a minor. Her last physical wasn't that long before, and it was clean. She should have been clean."

She should have been alive.

"And that was fine until Detective Bradford made his call," Reyes finished, posture back some now, giving the man his space, but still snap and chill.

Meadowvale looked back up, and his eyes were focused and angry. "No, it was not. It was not fine, because it should not have happened, and I -- my

profession is supposed to have something to say to that girl's mother."

Projection, Falkner thought, brushing stray dust off her tailored skirt and clasping her hands behind her back. You hurt the ones you feel sympathy for, because you're angry at yourself. Because somehow, inexplicably, you've failed.

"We're going to need the details," Reyes said. "The real ones. I can't say what your Board of Governors will want to do with this."

Meadowvale sagged a bit, again, remembering where he was, and with who. "I can do that," he said. "We'll need to go to my files."

His hand was nearly to the doorknob when it turned of its own accord, and Daphne Worth pulled it open with her hair plastered to her skull, breathing hard, sweat and shock and exhaustion.

"She's gone," Worth said, and the corners of her mouth were clamped down tight to keep something, everything in.

The breath went out of the room.

Falkner was used to this. She knew how this went. She sucked air in and held it for one, two, three. Watched Dr. Simon Meadowvale's face twist from anger, to slack shock, to the first inchings of despair.

Reyes stared at him for a long, cool moment. And then: "I'm calling in Frost," he said, and Dr. Simon Meadowvale's hands went behind his back to hide their tightening, but he didn't argue.

*

Susannah did not have time to mention the visit.

Normally she would have. Susie had a dim awareness that in a lot of ways, she was a Good Kid. She didn't get bad grades. She didn't steal sips of chocolate liqueur out of her parents' liquor cabinet except for that one time when she was thirteen; she didn't smoke or make out with guys in the gym equipment locker with the door propped open just so, although that last one wasn't for lack of trying.

She was Good. And it was pretty Bad to lie about the FBI, but a lot of things had changed that summer. She was still debating it when her mother came home.

Mom was early from work that afternoon, bustling and upset, and took two phone calls in a low, worried voice that just got lower if Susannah put herself anywhere inside three rooms of the conversation.

The phone hung up. She heard the clank half a house away, with the sun streaming in the front windows, over a dog barking down the street and the sound of the wind ruffling the two trees on the front lawn. Susie stayed put, and eventually her mother came in from the kitchen with her arms crossed across her belly, mouth set tight and terrible.

"Juliana's in the hospital," Mom said, careful. Susie's stomach, still hungry -- always hungry now and she'd sort of lost the point of why they'd started but there was no backing out now -- turned to acid.

"What happened?" she asked, and her voice stumbled, and God it was probably okay because Mom would think that it was surprise. That she didn't already know what happened.

"She fainted at home. Gordon Chu said he saw them take her to the hospital. He wanted to know if *we* knew anything." She paused. She was blinking too much. Mom was...really, really upset. "Susie, you'd tell me if something was wrong, right?"

Susie thought of blue freezies, and legs dangling off the basement pool table in the summer afternoon. She thought about their promise to each other, and keeping it going, and her hand on Juliana's waist to measure the inches. Her hot, dirty hand.

She thought about the FBI people who had come to the door that morning and knew she'd never been terrified before, not really, in her whole life.

The FBI card was still in her pocket.

She wasn't a Good Kid anymore and she knew it.

"I'm going upstairs," she said faintly, and Mom of course nodded her head, and reached out to pat her arm, and Susie held in her breath and let her, held herself in begging that the stiff heat wouldn't come and take everything good out of that one touch.

It did, of course.

She went upstairs, excused.

Susie wasn't supposed to have candles in her room; Dad was convinced that she'd burn the house down, and he didn't like the smell besides, but she snuck them away in a drawer and lit them nights when her parents were out or already sleeping. Firelight was different somehow than electric. It was peaceful.

Marissa, who was a year older than the rest of them and lived most of the year in Boston and smoked besides, had gone into the Hyannis Convenience and bought Susie's lighter for her so Seddon from her Geography class, who worked the counter two days after school and on Saturdays, wouldn't rat her out to her parents. It was pink, but she wasn't complaining. It was fire.

She struck the light -- still convinced that her parents could hear that little rasp across the house -- and touched the flame quickly to the nearest wick. Nobody came in. Nobody knocked on her door, so she drew out the card and turned it once, twice, in her hand, and set it into the flame.

The card didn't burn like in the movies. It singed at one corner, and then the singe got bigger and bigger and started to eat a brown stain through the stiff paper. It looked like dirt. *Like sin*, she thought, even though sin and religion weren't a thing her family was big on, not like Gabriela's was. Had been.

She shook it into a little dish as the browning got closer to her fingers; the burning stopped, then started up again as she set the candle close to it.

Slowly, sullenly, the pretty, skinny FBI woman's name and phone number vanished into dust.

Susannah Greenwood dumped the ashes carefully out the window onto the tiled gable and began to pack her knapsack.

Act IV

Ashton, VA, October 8, 2008

There were medical things to explain.

Falkner had no formal medical training. She'd picked up the usual field courses in the Army, and there were emergency medicine requirements for working as a field agent, but psychiatry, nutrition, neurology, medication schedules; none of those were on the curriculum. It was apparent that Susannah Greenwood's parents didn't completely understand either, and Dr.

Ramachandran explained and explained, answered all the questions. Didn't look at Susannah's stirring where she sat, cross-legged, on her bunk.

It took over an hour. And then, as was inevitable, they signed the papers.

They signed the papers, one after another. Robert B. Greenwood. Virginia L. Greenwood. Dr. Ramachandran took them back, and Falkner caught the edges of the signatures, the first large and looping, the second cramped. The doctor initialled in two places, and then countersigned at the bottom in that stereotypical medical scrawl, the one Falkner's father had always joked was illegible because they never wanted to be held responsible, those doctor types.

"All right," Casey said, and even his naturally forced cheer was hushed down. "We'll all be talking. We'll be talking about nutrition and therapies, and your input is important, and so is your approval." Different from Jessica Kelly, Falkner noted, but her manifestation was different, actively malevolent, and the parents she'd left behind weren't worth consulting. Falkner wondered how many papers on juvenile patients and ethics Casey Ramachandran had checked out of the library in the weeks just past.

She wondered how many new ones, submitted only to be classified, he'd be writing shortly on the nature of the anomaly.

"We will set up regular visits," Dr. Ramachandran continued, "and regular phone calls. And we will work this thing out."

Robert Greenwood took his wife's hand. She squeezed back, and lay her other hand close, close enough to touch, on the coverlet of her daughter's new bed.

Falkner and Reyes withdrew from the room and shut the door, and left Susannah Greenwood to the loving arms of her grieving parents and the doctor who was now her keeper.

*

Hyannis, MA, August 28, 2008

They were waiting on the autopsy to put Juliana in the ground.

Frost had landed on a 9:30 flight, waiting squinting on the runway in full pantsuit and a dusty, decorous hat right at the breakfast hour. As Falkner

pulled the black car up against the grassy strip that separated the small private runway from its service road, she could see Frost's right foot tap mechanically against the pavement.

"Thank you for coming," she said as Frost inserted herself in the passenger seat and clipped the seatbelt shut briskly. She was sweating slightly. It was already hot outside.

"You're welcome. You have the file?" Madeline Frost asked, all business, looking straight ahead through the windshield at their destination.

Falkner wasn't offended. It was a bit too much like pissing upwind to be offended at Madeline Frost. "In the pocket behind the seat," she said, and swung them back onto the road to Cape Cod Hospital.

Frost read Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht's brief medical history twice before they pulled into the visitors' parking lot and Falkner shut off the engine. She snapped the file shut and tucked it under her arm, picking up her overnight bag with the other hand, and followed Falkner silent into someone else's hospital like the ambassador of a conquering nation sent for the terms of surrender.

By now Falkner knew the route to the room where Simon Meadowvale did the region's autopsies. She walked it automatically, Madeline Frost's court herald, keeping hospital staff back with a striding disapproval and a deliberate assumption of the exact middle of the hallway. Reyes and Worth were waiting for them when they arrived, coffee cups in hand and a green-scrubs, nervous hospital aide in tow. She had dropped them off at the hospital first; neither had volunteered to ride along with Dr. Frost.

"Agents," Frost said crisply. Reyes reached out a hand and gave hers a brief shake. Worth ducked a nod and looked away. "Well, shall we?"

The dark-haired aide stood up a little too fast and opened the door.

Frost gave the room a cursory inspection -- ran a gloved finger over the counter surface and inspected the tip -- and then unrolled the nylon package that held her tools. "I presume there is an autoclave available," she said to the aide, who nodded.

"Very well," she said. "Bring her in."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., August 28, 2008

Hafidha came back from lunch to another dead girl in her inbox.

She knew better. She knew better than to open any e-mail with photo attachments without *thinking,* good and hard, about what might be inside and who was peeking over her shoulder. But she was tired from three days of late nights and early mornings; tired from a full meal driving the blood down from her brain to her intestinal tract and the tense, nerve-wearing boredom that was running support for a team in the field. So: naked shoulders, the top of a Y-incision, a pale dead mouth and tilted chin flickered onto her left-hand screen, and behind her Chaz sucked in air like a deep-sea diver at those cartoon xylophone ribs.

The screen blanked so fast she didn't realize for a few adrenaline-mouthed seconds that she hadn't touched the button.

He let out that breath.

Her stomach rumbled.

Aw, shit.

Duke poked his head in, forehead wrinkled in concern like a Mirrorverse Father Knows Best, inside a five-second count. "Everything all right here, cowfolks?"

Chaz was across the office -- the boy teleported like a cat sometimes -- with his hand in a file box like the veritable cookie jar. She got the feeling that for all the quality of the acting, he didn't care *which* file box it was.

She nodded. At both of them. *Stand down.* "Autopsy photos. Pretty little girl I wasn't expecting."

"Ah," he said, eyes sharp, and kept moseying into whatever sunset he'd been chasing.

"S'okay," she told Chaz -- *is it okay?* she asked -- and turned her monitor on again. This time with her finger.

The pictures came up just as glassy as before, just as aesthetically stark. Carefully smoothed hair. Carefully covered torso. Incision.

This should bother you too, you know.

She scrolled down.

There was medical information attached; the last rites and statistics of one Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht, sixteen, who could now be taken off their list of possible gammas roaming the Cape Cod area. Dead of a collapse spurred by heart failure -- coronary artery spasm -- due to catastrophic weight loss, due to an apparently undiagnosed case of juvenile diabetes.

Or that was their best guess.

"Our new victim," she announced to the room at large, and hid the photos behind her sparking, darkening population map. Chaz was back on the couch now. He didn't answer.

He'd been picking at that map like a half-healed scab over the last day, two days; tracking the habits and movements of their funeral attendees back and back, to the July fourth weekend, and shutting down the ones who couldn't possibly have had contact with Gabriela Carvalho de Santos. It was slog work; old-fashioned roll-up-your-sleeves, chomp-your-fat-cigar-and-dig investigative work.

It was working.

They had half their suspects down. And with Reyes's phone call, she'd cautiously created Version 2.0, kept it to the teenagers and kids. Which still stripped it down to a monstrous, overflowing, thoroughly excessive eleven. There were a wholly inappropriate amount of people in Cape Cod in the summer.

With the new datapoint, they might actually get it done before the gamma flipped out and ate all eleven.

"So there's something to chew on," she said, and zapped the whole thing to Chaz and Duke's inboxes. Which brought Duke back in a second later, trailing paper here and there so he might find his way home after.

"We all set?" he asked.

"Yeah," Hafidha replied and cracked her working map open. "Please hold."

Todd creaked down onto something she couldn't see and hoped wasn't breakable. Shifted. She glanced back; old kitchen chair, the one they'd found by the side of the road somewhere and stuffed into Chaz's trunk at the height

of last spring, ditched here until they actually got around to refinishing the damn thing. They'd bought the sandpaper sometime last month. It was between some boxes, somewhere. "So what did Dad say to you before they left?" he asked.

"Nothing," Chaz muttered.

"Mmhmm," Sol Todd said, stretching out long with the chair tipped back on two legs and his feet stretched out languorous atop Hafidha's fifth filing cabinet, filched from an unwitting supply closet three months ago last Monday, when they'd finally given up on the Poster System. The target number had actually been six. Unofficial motto of the WTF: Go big or go home. "They told *me* to keep an eye on you crazy kids."

"They?" Chaz said.

"That is my show of diplomatic goodwill," Todd replied, waving his hand in a half-assed, horizontal genuflection. "Send out your ambassadors."

"Oh, come on," Hafidha said.

"Solomon Todd, Supervisory Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation--"

Chaz stopped him before he could get to the serial number. "He asked if I was comfortable remaining on active duty," he said tightly. "Happy?"

Hafidha sat stiller in her chair at the snip in his voice. In the wholly unique and dying language that was the idiolect of Stephen Reyes, that meant *I am this close to taking you off active duty, and I am making that decision by how you react to this question. Which I have put mostly to watch which way you squirm.* And in the wholly unique language, mostly impermeable to anthropologists, that was the idiolect of Charles Villette, that meant *That, sir, embarrassed me, and was none of your goddamned business.*

Youch. Poor Platypus.

Solomon Todd, at least, wasn't most anthropologists. He sat up properly, his face sober and straight. "I didn't mean anything by it," he said. "Honest Injun."

"You're not Injun," Hafidha said, to keep that tightening silence away from her as much as anything else. "Not even an eighth on your mother's side."

"That too is fair and true," he replied. The silence stretched out a second longer. "Villette, I'm sorry."

They were all quiet for a minute.

"It's like they think we won't *talk,*" Hafidha said plaintively, and banged her Enter key.

"Wouldn't bet on that," Duke said. The chair had all feet on the floor again, and in the old bicycle mirror that she'd mounted over her left-hand screen for both paranoia and convenience's sakes, he was leaned forward now, face serious as all hell. "In fact, I'm about ninety-nine point six percent sure that he was counting on us talking."

Hafidha Gates was a profiler, Jim, not an anthropologist, especially when it came to the wholly unique and acclaimed as *completely fucking indecipherable* language that was the idiolect of Solomon Todd, but that sounded like a warning. And a request.

Don't make me take a bad report card back. Help me keep the hell out of that position.

Aw, shit.

"He, not they, huh?" Chaz said, thin and cool. Hafidha closed her eyes against the glow of her screens and let out a quiet breath. *Let it go, man. Take your PSA.*

There was a moment of considering.

"They's a construct anyway," Duke said, lighter, desultory, and quietly left the room.

Her servers hummed. No footsteps following or extant. Hafidha took a deep breath and counted backwards from ten. Team in the field. Work to do.

"Chaz," she said. No answer. "Platypus. Charles Xavier."

"It's Travis, Jean," he finally replied.

"Give Cerebro your top three suspects, Professor."

He shoved a piece of paper at her. Kevin Cheung, sixteen. Avi Liederman, seventeen. And Susannah Greenwood, also sixteen. "Apparently they all

hang out together," Chaz muttered. Still not a happy boy. "Or did, minus the dead ones."

"It's a direction," she said, and based on all those little things they'd appended to the e-mail about projection, she checked out the girl first.

There was easy database juice on the whole family: Mom Virginia, 41, research scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute specializing in pollutant effects on plankton and algae populations. Papa Robert, 43, accountant at a Hyannis firm. A household income, when you put the two together, that beat any special agent position until it crawled into a ditch bleeding. And Susannah Kate, their only child, going into her senior year of high school. No police calls to her name, no criminal records. They volunteered at local bake sales. According to their church bulletin, Mire Greenwood made a mean apple tart.

Decent to middling grades at school. No calls home for suspensions, although there was a weird and slightly bloody playground fight noted on her record dated May, with a *since this is the first instance of such behaviour, Susannah has been issued a warning rather than a one-day suspension.* And a few days back, Susannah Greenwood had been to the doctor.

Hafidha checked the date. Just about half an hour after Cecily Marshall was buried.

She leaned into the keyboard and went straight for those medical files.

Blood tests, glucose. Diabetes. That was one of the first things they had tested Hafidha for, back when they'd ascertained it wasn't the Hodgkin's coming back for round two. Back when they figured out that yes, she was irrevocably, totally, completely cancer-free...and then the mystery symptoms started. She could still go down the list: mononucleosis, sickle cell, protein metabolization issues, and diabetes. They'd drawn probably half her blood. None of it came back positive. She'd sat in the corner of her bathroom with the door locked and cried and cried. Big bad Secret Service lady.

Significant weight loss. Cessation of menstruation. The kid was so thin her period had stopped.

(Hafidha remembered that too. Pap smears. Hormone tests. A referral to a reproductive endocrinologist. A flirtation with a diagnosis of thyroid disease

before it all came out and she had to hack four medical databases and destroy her own records to shut the specialists down.)

She cracked open another window and tapped a few keys, tracing the samples to the hospital lab, waving away their security system like a cobweb. There were front door ways to do this, white-hat ways, but they took time, and time and the Lost City of El Goddamn Dorado were just as easy to come by when there was a team on the ground.

A few more taps and a careful dodge around the one countermeasure program they'd bothered to put in, and there it was. Nothing.

No reduced levels of insulin. No high blood sugar. No signs of sudden, flowering, destroying Diabetes Type 1.

The tests had come back with nothing.

"Go get Duke," she said to Chaz, underlining it again with her mouse pointer. Clean. Nada. Zero.

"Hafidha--" strained. Almost a bit whiny, in that way grown Chazzes could be whiny without ever altering the tone of their voice. He didn't want to do it.

No problems with iron. No problems with the thyroid. Just a weight loss that the doctors couldn't explain.

"Platypus, *go get him.*"

She heard the shuffle of his oversized feet not three seconds later, hustling out into the hall. Nobody'd done test referrals for her yet. Mystery weight loss, caught up in the medical system. There but for the grace of God go I.

There was a package of dried mango in the drawer. She yanked it out and started chewing mechanically. *This is your brain on low blood sugar, emo puppy,* she told herself. Took another handful.

She was halfway through the bag when they came back, Chaz still shirty as the day was long. Hafidha dusted her hand on her pants and turned her monitor to face them. "So," she said. "What do you fine gentlemen see here?"

They both leaned in. They both scanned. Chaz had just about as much medical training as she did -- with Duke, who knew what he knew or didn't -

- but everyone in Shadow Unit knew the half-handful of signs and symptoms that meant *gamma*.

"We sure it's not the next victim?" Duke said.

"I dunno," Chaz said, thoughtful. They both did him the credit of ignoring the flatness and strain he couldn't one hundred percent hide. Normal person back to work doing his job. Normal person totally, completely capable of doing his job. Yeah. "She's hanging on a long time."

"We want to send them in?" Duke asked.

"Not without intel," Chaz put in hastily, and that silence was back in the room again.

"Okay then," Hafidha said. She stretched her fingers, not the usual backwards flex but one by one, massaging them from the lowest joint up. "We find out everything we can about Miss Susannah Greenwood."

*

They were no farther at dinnertime, or past. Todd ordered Italian, doubling what he thought was more than enough and picking out just a salad for himself. Working with a team in the field was a little too much like a stakeout, or those unfortunate two months spent following June Fairchild to her corner supermarket and selling the shots to the *Enquirer*; one ate greasy, one felt sluggish, and consequently, one screwed up. And unlike June, gammas had more firepower than one miniature pleather handbag.

The front desk was good enough to send the food on up, even though their disapproval of delivery to federal buildings ran deep and measureless to man. They didn't even steal the garlic bread. Todd collected it at the door with both arms and, like a good provider, trucked the two bags' worth of carbs and grease and stakeout food back to his cluttered, untidy desk.

Villette was leaning back in his rolling chair down the way, head back, eyes shut, chest rising and falling faintly. The rip of the first paper bag and the immediate, murderous smell of garlic and parmesan failed to even make him breathe faster.

"I say, sir," Todd said in his best Foghorn Leghorn. Which was pretty damned good. "You livin', sir?"

"Mmph," Chaz said, and tilted his head up. His nose twitched. There were shadows under the boy's eyes.

"Chaz." Chaz didn't move. "Go home."

One foot flopped feebly off the other end of his desk, expertly dodging pens, files, a squat ugly little mantelpiece clock, and five scattered protein bars. "Can't. They're fumigating my building."

Todd ripped the second bag open and extracted his salad, left the cheap packet dressing. Any proper gentleman had his own in the office fridge. "Do you have any idea how much I don't believe that?"

His eyes opened, just a titch. "Nope," he said, and closed them again.

Todd gave up.

Hafidha accepted her share with only minor fanfare. "This is the life," she said. "All the T3 connections I can handle and fit, dangerous men to bring me my dinner." She held out her free hand. "Fork me, sir."

"Your life in the public service," Todd replied, and placed the plastic fork in her upraised palm.

Chaz trailed in, hollow-eyed, and flopped down on the yellow couch. It was going to have a dent in the shape of his rear end in another day or two. "Sir would like dinner after all?" Todd asked.

He could still kind of taste shoe leather in the back of his throat, but Villette appeared to be moving past it. "Yeah, hit me," he said, and Todd dug out a crinkled aluminum container of linguine with meatballs and ceded it to him. It smelled pretty good. *Salad*, he told himself, and took a minute to firm up his resolve.

Hafidha had moved her pasta down the desk a ways, trying to keep the sauce from slopping on her keyboard. "Anything?" he asked her, and she shook her head.

"No," she said. Stuck the fork back in. "It's a hell of a time trying to get a sense of what she's up to--" and she stopped, so abruptly that he could have sworn he heard one or two words back up and scramble back down her throat. "And I've been stupid," she said.

"What's that?" Todd asked carefully.

"I'm so busy looking at what the schools, the doctor, the Pope has to say about this girl, so busy running *victimology* that I didn't get to what she says about herself." She wheeled back to the keyboard and there was clicking, clacking, tapping, swearing. She looked like his old buddy Mickey had when they'd gone to shoot those Africa pieces for National Geographic, the first time he'd bit into one of those tasty little chocolate-covered raisins and found out they weren't raisins.

"Anything *now*?" he asked, getting over to his file cabinet and staying well away. You didn't hover around behind a person when they had their hands upon their tools. Or when they had a look on their face like that.

"Of course," Gates huffed. "Goddamn *Facebook*," and pointed an accusing finger at her left-hand screen. "She has a goddamned Facebook like everyone else under thirty who can even smell an internet in the desert at high noon in this whole benighted country, and I did not think to look for it until now."

He wouldn't have thought of it either. But that wasn't a useful contribution; he was, notably and importantly, an old fogey. "So you're cracking it," Duke asked mildly.

"I am cracking it wide open like your girlfriend on prom night," she drawled, and swung her head sharply back to the monitors.

"Actually, my prom date was chaste," he noted, absent, watching the play of source code and backdoor programs on the screen. It never did look like it did in the movies, which was a pity. "Answers to Sister Therese Immaculata these days; she sends me home-baked gingersnaps every year around Easter."

"You went to your prom?" Chaz muttered from his couch.

"Heartland rite of passage," he replied. It was best not to ask *you didn't?* A man could be touchy about that sort of thing. He passed the garlic bread instead.

"Huh," Hafidha said, leaning back. Scrubbed her eyes. "She completely shut this down and took it private this spring."

"That unusual?" Todd asked.

"Yeah," Chaz replied. "They're sort of meant to be seen."

"So," Todd said, turning the unopened salad around and around in his hands, "what we want may well be deleted."

"This is the internet," Hafidha said, tapping one plum-coloured fingernail against her mouse button in a way that reminded him of coyotes biding their time. "Nothing is ever gone for good."

She clicked something, hit a little twist of keys, and the interface peeled back into code and file groups and directories, something he was sure you would get in legal trouble for doing unless you were the FBI and weren't supposed to be able to do, period, unless you were Hafidha Gates. "Lessee," she said, and started clicking through.

Mostly it was status messages, games they played, comments on conversations half-snatched and ghosty without their proper context. It got long. Todd sat down and opened his salad and ate it without his gentleman's own salad dressing, not wanting to be out of the room if something important came on by -- as he inevitably would; the moment he got up for a leak the case would thoughtfully crack itself wide open. The garlic bread went around. He took one and bit in without thinking; hot, greasy, buttery and sharp. Stakeout food. Mm.

He was turned around tidying the takeout debris when they found it.

"Oh," Chaz said, and the smallness and terribleness of it turned Todd around gently by the shoulder and brought him to the screen.

It was a photo; he presumed it could only be of Susannah Greenwood's red-cheeked, smiling face. There was a jagged slice at the neck -- bad Photoshopping and they didn't care -- where it joined to a body that was decidedly not hers and which weighed at least four hundred pounds.

The string of comments went on for miles.

Thing was, it struck him wrong. Kids did this all the time, and the nasty things kids did had beginnings and middles and ends. Todd was a noted old fogey on the matter of social networking, but he knew about beginnings, and middles, and ends. And the way they were talking, the speed, the hatchet photoshop job...this wasn't a beginning.

"Go back," he said.

"Back?"

"There's more."

There was more.

They had gone through the animals phase; cows, pigs, whales. A manatee in there, which Todd had to admit impressed him a little in his swamp of unimpressedness, that they even knew what a manatee was. Maybe they taught that in coastal schools. Who knew.

They went back.

And there it was. A baby picture; a kid maybe ten years old, still the same recognizable manic-grinning face. A little heavy and round; nothing big. Nothing no other kid didn't go through and grow out of once puberty came a'knocking on their door. *Baby Whale Susie,* it was titled, in the very best headline style.

LOLOL this is the greatest, where'd you find this? said the first comment beneath it.

I had it from when we were kids, was the reply. Big, toothy emoticon grin. The name was familiar from their files and lists. Avi Liederman: same school, same neighbourhood, same group of childhood friends.

"That was her friend right there," Todd said. The image sat calmly on the screen.

"There," Charles Villette said, face too thin, cheeks sallow like dirty rice gone off. "Trigger."

*

Hyannis, MA, August 28, 2008

Falkner spent the afternoon at the hospital among Simon Meadowvale's files.

Reyes had run the interference this time. She'd sent him off with a packed lunch and a schoolbag into a horde of angry hospital administrators around noontime, and with dinner approaching, she'd not seen hide or hair of him. Or poor Detective Bradford, for that matter, last seen holding the hands of both parents and crying with them as he passed the tissue box around and Daphne Worth patiently, carefully put them to the question.

Her team straggled home by seven, raggedy and wilted and hungry. "News?" she asked them, and Nikki Lau shook her head.

"Nobody else died," Brady said, and she lifted herself from the piles of paperwork with a sigh.

"Then dinnertime for all good children," she announced, and sent Worth to the nearest nurse's station to ask after a restaurant that cooked vegetarian somewhere inside county lines. Which reminded her that she hadn't called home yet that day. After dinner, she told herself. When there was somewhere quiet, unclogged with the ghosts of dubious autopsies and musty paper and a thin absence of dead teenagers, where there was time.

They could rescue Reyes on their way out.

The vegetarian was Indian, and it was not cheap. But it was quick and plentiful, and neither Falkner or Lau had to pick anything out of the food just to get a square meal. Not spicy, either, but this was the land of seafood and potatoes, hold the funny powders, thanks. Falkner ate her chickpeas and was thankful to have them.

"She said they were on a diet," Worth pressed. She'd been picking at this for ten minutes now, all the time they'd had between ordering and the inevitable hush that fell over a table for five minutes after the food showed up. "A support group. Keeping each other honest. And then they start dying."

"That's not anomalous," Brady added. "Every teenager in North America is trying to lose weight that doesn't need losing." He looked down at the food on his plate for a second as if it were the proverbial can of worms, made a face, and deliberately tucked in anyway.

"Every girl, at least," Worth said.

"Every teenager," he corrected around a mouthful, and poked a piece of chicken with his fork. "And that's still not anomalous."

"No, it's not. But it's got to be tied in," Worth said. "Losing weight. Dying of lost weight, wanting to lose weight. And your friends helping you do it."

"And you helping your friends do it?" Lau put in, and Worth stopped and turned to her to stare.

Falkner felt the first flutter of something between her heart and her throat. "Go on," she commanded, and Lau sat up a bit straighter in her chair.

"Maybe--" she said, on the spot suddenly, and putting on her poise, putting on her face. "Maybe our unsub doesn't mean them to die."

Reyes turned his fork over, put it down, picked up a piece of naan and turned that too. "We have yet to really discuss that. Mythology."

"Yeah," Lau said. Encouraged, just a bit, Falkner noted. "You have a support group. You want to lose weight, because every sixteen-year-old kid wants to lose weight, and you're trying to help them. You like your friends and you want them to be happy. So you take the weight off them."

"How?" Reyes asked, sharp as a lecture-hall professor.

"Diabetic reaction," Worth says. "Sudden-onset type 1 diabetes."

"Would she have to know how diabetes worked?" Brady asked. Falkner did not inquire why he'd abandoned his every teenager theory; it wasn't important now, and this was. This was.

"I doubt it," Reyes said. "Method's not a concern of the anomaly. It's results."

"So you're trying to help, you're taking the weight off your friends, you're dieting with them-- hey," Worth said, "how's a *gamma* dieting?"

Esther Falkner had only tried dieting once. She had been thirteen and a little more easily swayed, spooked although she didn't know it at the changing of her body, the way it was hungry all the time, how her younger sister called her *pig* when she went for a second afternoon snack. She had forgiven that later, years later; Chava was only repeating the things she'd heard at school, the things directed to her own self. You weren't supposed to be a big eater as a girl back then; no more than you were now.

It had lasted a week, and all in all, what she remembered about it was being vaguely, unsatisfiedly, crankily *hungry.* All the time.

Quietly, Falkner asked: "What do gammas do when they're hungry?"

There was a pool of silence around the table that the bits of chatter from other tables, from the faraway groups of sunburned tourists and local families with dressed-up, kicking children, could not fill or clean.

"They feed," Reyes said, and leaned back in his chair. "This isn't selfless help. It's sustenance dressed up as help."

A wicked thing clothed as a good thing. Harm covered in good intentions. A justification.

Mythology.

Worth frowned. "What if that's why it's accelerating? Not that the gamma's decompensating, just...if the pool shrinks, so the gamma has to draw more and more from less and less--"

"And so they die faster," Brady said low. "And they're all hungrier and hungrier."

Reyes's phone shrilled loud enough to raise heads at the next table.

"Dammit," he mumbled, his mouth full of naan, and fumbled for a napkin to wipe his phone hand with. The phone rang again, and Falkner reached over, plucked it from his pocket, and thumbed it on. "Agent Reyes's phone," she said.

"Falkner?" Hafidha Gates said through invisible static.

"Speaking," she said.

It only threw Gates for a moment. "We spent the day with the files you sent and some other--I found something," she said, breathless. Her voice was unexpectedly fuzzy on the other end of the connection.

"What's that?"

"Our suspect," Hafidha said, and Falkner put down her fork.

*

The night had rolled in while they were eating, and with it, the ocean fog. Summer was ending on Cape Cod; the air was thick with the first hint of autumn, even though the actual fall of the leaves was a long way off. Falkner turned off the air conditioning in the car as they pulled out onto Main and sat with her hands in her lap all the way down half-rural, picturesque streets to the Greenwoods' driveway.

It was pretty out here. The kind of place Falkner's parents might have retired to if they weren't such city creatures. You expected rolling golf courses and smiling white-hatted seniors in the prime of hale life around every corner, people who watched out for their neighbours. Bake sales. Young men fishing off docks with their dogs dozing beside them, Norman Rockwell-style.

That never existed, she told herself, and gathered herself together as Reyes neatly parked their borrowed black car at the end of the Greenwoods' drive. The house itself was beautifully pillared, balconied all around the second story like a ship. Potted plants creaked on hooks hanging down, and on the balcony, she thought she saw roses.

"We gave the girl my card," Lau said. *The girl*, not *her* or *Susannah*. Process of depersonalization begun. "They might be expecting us."

Brady swung himself into the front seat of the car. "Or not," he said. "They didn't call back." He picked up the police radio Barnstable PD had provided them and hefted it, taking its measure. Worth was in the second car, doing the same kind of checks. Backup. In case things went badly.

"We'll just be ready for whatever comes," Falkner said firmly, and went up the white-painted stairs to the door, trailing Reyes and Lau in her wake. Knocked.

A woman opened the door, and it took Falkner a second to realize that she was too tall, too old, too *stocky* to be their unknown subject. They were silent that second too long; Virginia Greenwood -- it had to be the mother, of course -- tilted her head and tightened her hand on the doorknob, and asked: "Hi, can I help you?"

"Ms. Greenwood?" Falkner said; she had a good sense of when to call another woman *Mrs.*, and Virginia Greenwood, with that crisp tone of voice and those careful hands, was not that. "SSA Esther Falkner, FBI; this is SSA Stephen Reyes and Special Agent Nicolette Lau. We came by this morning and left a card; do you have a few moments?"

The woman's forehead creased with a brief frown. No, she had not received the card; another point against this being an easy collar. There was no response over her tiny, discreet earpiece, but Falkner figured Brady was nodding to himself in the dark of the unmarked car. "This is about the little girls," Virginia Greenwood said.

And yes, they would be little girls to her, just the way Deborah still was that tiny, perfect, compact little toddler forever in the back of Falkner's own head. "It is," she said. "Might we come in?"

There was a fruit bowl in the living room, and hand-knotted rugs. Childhood art, smeary paint scrabbled all over, was flattened out carefully and hung,

framed, above the rough red-brick fireplace, complete with a jagged crayon signature. Perfect, normal American family. The kind that didn't show up on any psychological tests.

The television flickered off in the other room with a sudden absence of noise, and the father -- Robert, she reminded herself -- appeared barefoot around a corner. "Gin?" he asked, as she closed the door and locked it, perched herself on the arm of a stuffed and modern chair. He was slim and balding in a way some women would probably find endearing; there were little red marks on the sides of his nose where glasses likely habitually sat, and he was wearing a tee-shirt for a baseball team she didn't know.

"Agents," Virginia Greenwood said instead of an answer, "this is my husband Robert. Rob, these are those FBI agents."

Those. She saw Reyes's expression flicker with that suppressed humour. Word travelled fast 'round these parts.

"Your daughter knew Cecily Marshall?" Reyes asked, smothering it efficiently.

"Yes," Robert said cautiously.

"And Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht," he added. It was a whole day later, a day and an autopsy and a report signed and sealed and delivered onto a county's records desk. They would know already.

They knew.

"Something *is* going on," Robert Greenwood said in the tone of a man who'd just won an argument, and stepped into the room, planted his hands on the back of his wife's chair.

Something. Yeah. "Yes. Robert, Virginia-- may I?" Reyes asked, supposedly an afterthought, a courtesy. Rapport.

"Call me Ginny," she said. Automatic.

"Did something," Reyes asked, "happen with Susannah and her friends this spring? Something upsetting--" you never used *traumatic* with someone's parents, oh no "--or out of the ordinary, or difficult?"

And this was unfair. They knew. They knew all the dates, places, names. But they still needed to drag these people through it, to know how much they

knew. To know if there was anything they were missing.

"There was an...incident," Robert Greenwood said. His hands tightened on the back of that chair. "It didn't involve the other girls. And it's over now."

"What sort of incident?" Reyes asked.

"Kids behaving badly," he said coolly, and his wife stiffened in a way that told anyone, not just a profiler, that it had been more than simply that.

"Kids eat each other alive at this age," Reyes said, tucking one more piece of tinder into her discomfort, and Ginny Greenwood let out a breath, a rueful, pissed-off, tiny breath. Yes, that was true. And knowing that didn't make it one bit easier, or anything like acceptable, when it was your kid on the plate.

Time to be Good Cop again.

"I have a daughter," Falkner said, knowing it would come out anything but offhand. "She's fourteen. Two other girls stuffed itching powder down the back of her shirt at the mall this week."

Lau gave her a glance that was near-unprofessionally startled; one raised eyebrow and a shift from left foot to right. One did not talk about one's own family with interviewees. Esther Falkner did not talk about her own family with her coworkers.

Ginny Greenwood turned to her husband; he looked down. *Angry.* And then she placed her hands deliberately on the knees of her floppy loose jeans and there was nothing welcoming on her face at all.

"Susie had a friend," she said. "All those kids, they grew up together, you know. Birthday parties, kindergarten. We would park them all at one person's house when we needed a day off."

They'd moved around enough before she settled into the Bureau that Rebekah's childhood friends were in three different cities, two of them actually army bases. With one of them, she e-mailed back and forth regularly. With the others, they had lost all touch. "I know," Falkner said.

"And Susie was..." There, the pause. The telling thing. The shame. "A bigger kid when she was younger. So was I. Our family, we grow into and out of it."

"You were both fine," Robert said, a little tiredly, in the way that said this wasn't a new discussion and the lines were all the same.

"That's not the important thing," she snapped. Apologized immediately; a touch to his arm. "The important thing is that she's sensitive about it. And the boy down the street, Avi, he dug out some of the old pictures they had from when the kids were nine or ten or so and put them on the internet. On Facebook. And a whole pack of kids started making fun of her."

"What happened?" Falkner said, calm and detached and professional.

The frown lines that had snuck onto Ginny Greenwood's face were suddenly etched in acid. "We spoke to Avi's parents. And I contacted the Facebook Abuse Team and had them taken down."

She did not want to say *yes.* She did not want to say *we found them. We picked a hole into your daughter's life and looked through, and you cannot get those things scrubbed away so easily after all, and for the right people, those shameful things will exist, somewhere, forever.* So: "Most parents aren't that comfortable with technology," she said, quiet and careful.

Ginny Greenwood stuck her chin out. "I did not study advanced biology for ten years to be put off by a pack of teenagers and some website. I learned."

Falkner nodded. She would have learned too. If it came down to it, she would learn and stuff those pictures down the throat of anyone who tried to hurt her little girl. Or as near enough to that as the law of the land permitted.

(And it was still waiting at home. But not now. Later.)

"But it upset her," Falkner said.

"Yeah," Ginny Greenwood replied, and glanced at her husband -- a hint of reproach, perhaps -- and he looked away. "It upset her. There has been...fallout."

A pause. And then the thing out there, at last. "May we speak with Susannah?" Lau asked, careful and professional. "You can be present if she's more comfortable that way, either or both of you."

They waited. This was inevitable.

Stephen Reyes had made them afraid for their child.

"All right," Ginny finally said, and went to the foot of the stairs. "Susie?"

There was no answer.

Falkner did not know the acoustics of this house, where you stood to hear the pipes or where the sound echoed off in the middle of the night, but she didn't hear a stereo, and she didn't hear water running. "Suze?" Ginny Greenwood called again, and then frowned, and started up the stairs.

Victim on the floor breathing hard breathing her last, Falkner thought. Or *hiding out from the cops, heard the cops, afraid of the cops.*

Or *frightened desperate gamma.*

She patted her hip to make sure the sidearm was there and followed upstairs.

There was no answer to the knock on the door. Ginny Greenwood looked back at her apologetically, in consternation, worried and annoyed and wanting to do this all without this stranger in her house. "Susie, open this door."

Falkner's hand was on the grip, familiar and metallic. The safety under her thumb. She wasn't as fast a draw as she'd been at twenty-five, but she was still fast enough.

"Susie?" Virginia Greenwood knocked again, a frown tucking her chin in, and then Falkner saw the horrible thought -- *dead child* -- slam into her like a storm front. "Suze, I'm coming in," she said.

"May I?" Falkner asked, and before Ginny Greenwood could reply *no*, she pushed the door open.

It was a very teenage room; the kind Rebekah might want in a year or two, all the pink painted over and posters tacked on the walls and laundry lying in drifts all over the floor. A half-melted votive candle, the scented kind you could get from dollar stores which all smelled like high fructose corn syrup and chemicals, was half-hidden behind a stack of books.

"Oh god," Ginny Greenwood said.

The window was open. The bedsheets were mussed -- no, missing, roped in the most stereotypical knots from the windowsill to the balcony railing and down, and the white lace curtains fluttered through the propped-up pane, into the empty night sky.

Act V

Hyannis, MA, August 29, 2008

They did not know the terrain. Not like a child who'd grown up exploring it, building bonfires on the beaches, navigating the roads home summer and winter after dark fell with a memory-map to work with. But there were only so many places to go in Barnstable County without a car, a boat, a plane.

They assembled the searchers inside an hour.

"Work in pairs," Brady instructed them in a voice that was hoarse but carrying. Detective Bradford lingered next to him, face pale and puffy, lending whatever local backing they might need. "Do not leave your partner under any circumstances. Make sure everyone has the following things: flashlight, cellphone, your map and your picture." He held up the photo of Susannah Greenwood, hastily photocopied twenty-five times on the Barnstable County Sherriff's Office four-in-one, like a flight attendant demonstrating exits. "Step carefully; the visibility's just peachy out here--" a few nervous laughs "--and the last thing we need is anyone down. Make sure you stick to your quadrant; cover your quadrant throroughly, and if you find Susannah or anything else important, *do not touch.* Phone it in to the central number."

Lau sat on the tailgate of a PD pickup truck and gave a little wave with her cellphone. The central number. She looked drawn, pinched; only visible to someone who knew her, friends and family and Esther Falkner, but the townspeople saw nothing but a professional smile.

"All right, let's go," Bradford said, and the murmuring, foot-shifting, arm-clutching bundle of nerves that was the adult year-round population of Hyannis Port spread out along the road.

Falkner clutched her flashlight, patted the pocket that housed her cellphone, and turned to Susannah Greenwood's mother. "Ginny? Time for us to go."

Virginia Greenwood looked up at her, eyes fever-bright and empty. Susannah had been there that morning. She'd kissed her mother goodbye. She was a responsible kid, okay to leave on her own or to send out for the day going to the mall or the beach or a friend's house; she always kept her cellphone on in case they needed to reach her.

She wouldn't have just run away like this.

Falkner flicked on her flashlight and they set off down the road. Three, four, five steps. At the fifth, Ginny Greenwood followed.

Do not shoot, Reyes had said, *under any circumstances but life-threatening ones. This manifestation is subtle and this town* will not understand.

They had blocked the county roads. No boat was going out tonight, and Susannah's parents had assured them, numb and trembling, that she wouldn't try to take one out herself. There was only so far she could go.

Falkner walked her quadrant, and Ginny Greenwood followed.

The fog made sound carry. "Susie!" it called, between trees and houses and roadsides, the carefully-tended lawns of the rich. "Susannah Greenwood!" in a multiplicity of voices, everyone the girl would have known or loved or hated in a whole compact lifetime, except for the ones she had killed.

"You should call," Falkner said. Stopped for a second to let Ginny's mind and mouth and blank eyes catch up. "She'll answer you."

Ginny blinked once, twice. And then turned towards the swath of lawn the flashlight illuminated and called: "Susannah? Susie, baby? It's Mom. Answer me." They reached the roadside. "Please."

Falkner watched for movement. For bodies. For anything small and wasted and frightened. When she got home she would take both girls to the zoo, to the movies; hell, she'd even drive them into D.C. and spend a day at the Smithsonian. Whatever they wanted. Whatever would make sure they'd answer if she called.

They walked. All the quadrants sliced through Hyannis and down to the beach, to the water. They walked.

The ocean was like a jet engine this close up: a constant roar, pushing and falling back, blurring the edges of her normally good hearing. The footing was bad too, shifting and squishing under her feet. It was like walking through packing snow, the same half-solid slip, but worse. She braced her knees, swept the flashlight back and forth. Covered the sand.

Stopped.

Susannah Greenwood was sitting at the tideline, backpack straps tightened so it rode high on her back. A slight stir of wind ruffled her tee-shirt, four sizes too big at least, and yanked it up around her waist. She pulled it down reflexively. The bones were sharp in her hands. The waves broke around her hips, her feet, her huddled-up knees.

She looked so much younger than sixteen.

"Susie?" Virginia Greenwood said, and her voice cracked. "Susie, baby, where were you going?"

"Nowhere," the girl whispered, and behind the flinch away from the flashlight beam there was a horrible, numb guilt.

There was nowhere to put the flashlight. Nowhere if she moved sharp and violent. Falkner muttered into her radio, under the ocean, under the fog: "We've got her."

Lau's voice came on quick through her earpiece, clear as daylights. "All right, everyone call off; what's your position?"

"We're down at the end of our quadrant. On the beach. Right by the water. She's mobile, but bring the ambulance."

She only imagined the rustle of maps, the careful pinpoint. "Okay, everyone. Coordinates are south--"

"Susie, you know we love you, you know there's nothing you couldn't tell us about--" Ginny Greenwood said, her voice spiralling over the ocean, thin and heartbroken.

Falkner turned down the volume on her earpiece until her team's voices stopped drowning out here, now. They were coming.

She just had to keep everyone here for them.

Susannah was shaking her head, automatic, desperate. *No. No no no.*
"Susie," her mother said, nearly a whimper. "Tell me, God, tell me what we did wrong."

"Mama," Susie whispered; the flashlight caught her face, made her pupils big and the hollows of her cheeks even thinner. The frustration. The tears. "Mama, I'm hungry."

Virginia Greenwood choked on something. "Suze--"

"Virginia!" Falkner called sharply as Ginny Greenwood stumbled down the beach, arms outstretched, trying to pull her daughter away from the sea.

She reached out and missed; stumbled, swore, started to run after her. Ginny lunged--

"*Don't touch me!*" Susannah screamed, and rolled away, soaking, into the tide. The knapsack ripped off her back, clunked heavily into the waves.

Do not shoot, Falkner told herself. This is not a gamma, this is a frightened teenage girl. Think, don't shoot.

"Why shouldn't anyone touch you, Susie?" Falkner asked, quiet, careful, forgiving. Her breath was heaving; too hard. Too hard and she would choke on it if she didn't *calm the hell down, soldier.*

"It'll--" the girl said, and broke down into sobs. "It'll take you away. It'll hurt you, Mama, it'll hurt you."

Ginny's hand was still out; she was crawling in the sand, crawling towards her baby girl, and Susannah wept and wept as she inched farther away.

"We won't touch you, Susie," Falkner said, and caught up to Ginny, and with a deep breath, put herself between them. "You take all the space you need. Nobody'll touch you unless you ask."

Falkner was up to the knapsack now. She bent to lift it, to put it aside, and her wrist and arm and shoulder stopped short as it did not lift and did not lift. *Rocks,* she thought, with hyperclarity. She steeled herself, cautioned her grumbling back, and heaved it up onto her shoulder with gritted teeth. Susannah's mother should never know this. She would make sure it was never known.

"Tell us what's wrong, Susie," she said, low and soothing. "We'll help you out. We'll make sure you're safe, okay?"

They were close now. Falkner could hear the occasional sound of an engine, a step in the brush that led to the beachside.

"I'm hungry," Susannah whispered, and buried her face in her terrible, Auschwitz knees.

Ginny Greenwood's keening wail could not drown out the surf, but it echoed up through the fog, off the rocks, into the night.

The first flashlight broke the darkness.

Falkner knelt five feet away, in the gritty, giving, unstable sand. The ocean came in. The ocean drifted out. "Don't worry," she said, soft and calm. Not Susannah's mother, but somebody's. "We'll get you something to eat."

*

Ashton, VA, October 8, 2008

Daphne Worth was normally good at waiting. She'd cruised city streets in empty ambulances at three hours to dawn enough nights, sat in mercifully quiet emergency rooms enough nights, sat by the bedsides of people she loved while they breathed in one rattling wheeze after another, in-out, in-out, waiting. She'd waited without complaint for the two whole days it took to get Susannah Greenwood packed up and in custody, shipped carefully to Virginia under federal guard while, in Cape Cod, they put Juliana Ferreira-Albrecht in the ground. Two days before she'd been released home to D.C. and the arms of her wife and a wedding perilously close, herself perilously tired. She prided herself on waiting.

She wished she'd brought a book.

The elevator sounded, up-not-down, and behind the nurses' station she straightened, blinking. But not Reyes, not Falkner; instead a skinny, tough little man got off the elevator, eyes down and watching the white lino floor, moving quick and compact so as to alert as few of the surrounding fauna as possible of his presence.

Familiar.

"Dyson Cieslewicz," she blurted, and her face went from cool to Nevada at noontime in about two seconds.

They'd only met in passing about thirty catastrophes ago, but he recognized her. "Hey," he said, slightly awkward. His left hand crept behind his back. Worth was sure he didn't notice it.

Only one catastrophe for him, she reminded herself. Of course he recognized her.

"Hey back," she said. Overcautious. Paramedics didn't see most of their patients a second time unless things were going really wrong, and FBI agents never did. "How are you doing?"

He gave the tiniest of shrugs. Almost one-shouldered. "Moved up to D.C. Still tending bar."

Not much else, Worth translated, and worked heroically to not bite her lip. "Visiting?"

He nodded. Sharp and quick. Breath-held. "It's my day."

"Well," she said, shifting in her chair because awkwardness was contagious that way. "Don't be a stranger."

"Yeah," he said, faint in the way that meant he didn't mean it at all or meant it all too much, flashed a pained smile at the nurses, and took himself down the hall.

"He visits every Wednesday," Nurse Sharon said conspiratorially. "Good brother, that man."

Families didn't visit Idlewood. They didn't even have to actively discourage it, when there was family left. Worth filed that tidbit away for later.

He was in and gone, with a tiny, hesitant wave goodbye, before Falkner and Reyes made their way back into the lobby. There were fatigue bruises under Reyes's eyes. Worth presumed she couldn't see Falkner's because of the makeup. They looked around the lobby, and from behind the comforting barrier of counter and computers and clutter, she stood.

"We're about done here," Reyes said.

Worth let out her breath. "They signed?" she asked.

Of course they signed.

"They signed," Falkner answered, and nodded to Nurse Sharon, eavesdropping avidly behind a clipboard. "Thank you for your time," she said, formally, as if they'd imposed rather than provided a fresh month's worth of gossip to the staff of Idlewood Psychiatric Institute.

Worth gathered her shoulder bag and jacket, slugged down the last of the coffee in her paper cup and dropped the cup in the blue recycle bin.

"Thanks," she said, likewise -- even if it wasn't an example, Mom wouldn't be *unhappy* -- and started down the hallway.

Esther Falkner didn't follow.

"Go ahead," she said, and smoothed down her navy-blue skirt. "I'll catch up."

Ah, Worth thought. *Two cars*. It was hard to not abruptly feel used.

Reyes swept past her and into the elevator. When she glanced back, Falkner had already turned, seating herself on the one little couch that served as a makeshift lobby for the whole rangy, Victorian, ugly building. There weren't any magazines for her to pick up; she had clasped her hands in her lap and was just waiting.

Worth gritted her teeth and got into the elevator with Stephen Reyes.

She didn't look at him while the old accordion-grate elevator descended. Idlewood was a historic site, and while the state of Virginia had somehow been informed of the necessity of reinforcing the walls, installing certain countermeasures, replacing the glass with something double-paned and unbreakable, they had held firm on the original elevators. When it shuddered to a halt he held the gate for her only in a cursory way. It slammed shut once she was through.

If they were going to work together, she would have to talk to him. Or quit.

So: "Should she even be here?" Worth asked. A pause. Reyes kept walking. "She's not a proper gamma. She isn't--"

Out of her head. Nuts. Malevolent. Susannah Greenwood had been operating for months on low blood sugar. Low blood sugar made you stupid. It altered your decision-making skills. It let you think things and do things that...well. Made it easy to be a gamma.

Reyes turned the corner, waved his pass at the door that locked from both inside and out until the little light turned green. "Susannah Greenwood is difficult to classify."

The sunlight flooded into the hallway as the metal door swung out. Late afternoon; maybe enough time to get home for a solid dinner and a quiet

night on the couch with Tricia if the traffic wasn't horrific. Here she was, leaving Idlewood. Not having to come back, or stay.

She was the luckiest woman alive.

"She's not out of control," Daphne pressed, and it was dangerous, maybe, what she was thinking. A good diet plan, friends and family who loved her, a solid awareness of her abilities and what they meant, what they could and could not do and who had to be in charge at all times. Those small, piddling things, and she could be just like--

"All teenagers are out of control," Reyes said. "Most of them survive it."

The door swung shut behind them. Closed. Locked.

Daphne Worth got into the car with her boss and shut the door. They were silent all the way back to D.C., and when he let her off at the office garage, she declined to say goodnight.

*

Esther Falkner waited forty-one minutes in the lobby for Robert and Virginia Greenwood to say goodbye to their daughter. They emerged from the hallway guided by an orderly who looked a half-year's work out of trim for the weightlifting event at the Olympics just as the nurses were changing shifts, day to evening, leaving their records for overnight. There was a full complement of staff on duty at Idlewood twenty-four hours a day. The Municipality of Ashton was grateful for it. Ashton had been a logging town and then a tobacco town, and with tobacco farming in decline after years of relative prosperity, the farms had shrunk and withered. The double handful of stable government jobs that Idlewood brought were, despite everything, never empty.

This employee's tag read *Troy.* Troy smiled at them, equal little children under God, and said, "Ma'am, can I leave the lady and gentleman with you?"

Falkner took the hint. "Yes, thanks," she said, and rose to smooth her skirt. The Greenwoods' eyes were hollow. It was a familiar expression.

"You're staying the night?" she asked.

Robert Greenwood nodded. It was sharp and distracted, and his eyes did not meet her own, but watched something over her shoulder, far away. Another world. "There's a bed and breakfast in town."

She knew it. "It's good," she offered, and fell silent again. The Greenwoods looked at the walls, at the curious nurses trying hard as they could to overhear a conversation where the voices could be nothing but low. They didn't know the way out. She would have to show them.

"Ginny--" Falkner said.

"Virginia," she corrected.

"Virginia," Falkner repeated, and cursed her thoughtless tactics. "Robert. Thank you both for coming out here. It's the best thing for her. I promise."

"She looks happier," Virginia said. Met Falkner's eye. "Healthier."

"Healthier," Falkner agreed. Idlewood knew how to feed a gamma. Susannah Greenwood was young enough that five high-carbohydrate meals a day was something she might adjust to, in time. Once the psychiatrists were gone and she could look at a magazine ad without flinching once again.

Not that she would. Magazines were another thing you didn't see much of in Idlewood. Just like television, internet, and telephone privileges. For all intents and purposes, Susannah Greenwood's fragile body image would never be threatened again.

"Casey's a good doctor," is all she said, sounding weak to her own ears, but Robert Greenwood just nodded once, terse and sorrowful. Normally she would have said *Dr. Ramachandran,* respected his professional standing. But the papers were signed, and henceforth the Greenwoods and Casey Ramachandran would see enough of each other for first names.

"He seems to be," Virginia said, and once again ducked her chin, staring at the walls.

It was intolerable. It was her obligation, and though the work was heavy some days, neither was she free to desist from it, but today, tonight, tonight of all nights it was intolerable.

"Can I ask you--" Falkner started, and it caught.

"What?" Virginia Greenwood asked, her voice shorn of courtesy, of anything but gaping, frightened pain.

Falkner swallowed and plaited her hands behind her. Professional. Bulletproof. A false at-ease. She did her best to meet the other woman's eye.

"I'm so sorry for all of this. We did not want to do this to your life. Please--" and she thought about what she was really asking, what she really wanted; *believe me. Understand me.* "--forgive me," she finished.

Virginia Greenwood did not look down first.

"Marissa Tobin's dead." She said it in a rush, breathless; like a slap she was afraid to deliver. "They buried her at home two weeks ago."

Falkner shut her eyes. Remembered Marissa's mother -- Alex, protective and angry, holding her sister's hand -- and wondered who was there to keep the crows off for her, who was holding her hand. She would have to tell Reyes and reopen the file. She didn't want to speak to Reyes.

She'd thought they'd accounted for them all.

"It wasn't that," Robert Greenwood said, toneless. Taking pity. Or pitiless. "Anorexia. Her parents took her to the doctor. They were going to put in a feeding tube." He paused. "She threw herself into the harbour in the second week of school and they dredged her out two days later."

Of course. They were addictive, the bad things you did to your body. Even when you didn't have a gamma to help you along.

"Did you tell her?" Falkner asked, and immediately felt shamed for it.

A pause. "No," he said, and the chill passed and they were three imperfect and teenage-awkward and guilty parents once again, lying to their children so as to push off the day of their breaking just a little farther out.

Falkner nodded, slow. "I'll leave that with her doctor," she said. The Greenwoods ducked their heads as one, acquiescence, and all three knew Dr. Casey Ramachandran would never hear a word of a teenage girl two days missing, driven to starvation and grief by the deaths of her cousin and two childhood friends, committed to earth in all mourning for her lost potential by surviving mother, father, aunt and uncle, and two brothers of university age.

They were good enough to shake her hand before they left. They had not forgiven her, Falkner reflected, but they had shaken her hand. Perhaps that was close enough.

There was a bank of monitors behind the nurse's station, some blanked for privacy or medical privilege or the sheer desire of the nurses and guards not to know what went on in the lower rooms. Esther Falkner watched Susannah Greenwood's for a time before she left, painted in black and white and sunshine-drenched with the fading afternoon, the sun you could only get in a semi-rural place in early autumn. She was looking out the window, staring somewhere far away, with a little box in her hands.

One of the orderlies noticed her watching, shuffled up beside her. "That isn't contraband?" she asked.

"Doctor said it was fine," the orderly said, and the bony little hands opened it.

She waited until Susannah Greenwood had strapped her homecoming corsage onto her wrist and reseated herself on the bed by the double-thick plastic institutional window that looked east, eastward towards home. Her wrists were delicate; the very picture of youth and grace. She could have been a painting.

Esther Falkner was a long time in leaving.

*

Falkner took the freeway back to Maryland in silence. Traffic was snarled for five miles before her exit. The sky was turning pink before she made it home to change for Kol Nidre.

"Mom!" Rebekah hollered as Falkner kicked off one shoe, then the other. "Where *were* you? We're going to be late!"

Her eldest was at the top of the stairs, navy blue tights and dress half zipped up, her little sister trailing in a mess of unkempt hair and quickly silenced complaints. "Mommy!" she said, still young enough to use the word. "Rebekah's pulling my hair."

"Bekk," she corrected automatically, then: "I was *combing* it."

"It *hurt*," Deborah snapped.

"Girls," she said mildly. Something in her voice stopped them; a shadow of still-green lawns and the autumn flowerbeds installed every September by groundskeepers who still believed in Moral Treatment, windows with

unbreakable glass and bedrooms watched by camera, doctors and mothers and nurses who lied.

"I didn't," Rebekah said lamely, and edged herself against the banister.

Falkner studied her face. The hitch of her shoulders.

The kid was *worried.*

Should have called home, she thought, and added it to her list of faults to enumerate before the river tonight. But forgiveness before God could not come before that of human beings, and so "I'm sorry, Bekk," she told her eldest daughter. "I should have called."

Rebekah blinked at her for a full second. Fourteen years old; not old enough to have received many apologies from parents, to have it ceded to her fully that she was in the right. "S'okay," she said a little faintly, and glanced down at her sister.

"Deborah, let your sister fix your hair while I get changed?" she said. "And just tell her if it pulls and she'll be more careful."

"Okay," Deborah said, and caught Falkner's hand as she came up the stairs. Falkner dropped a kiss on her youngest's head, gave her eldest a smile. "Thank you," she told them, and went into her bedroom.

She had chosen her outfit on the way home; Falkner didn't believe in phone calls or distracted driving while stuck in traffic on the freeway, but there was plenty one could do with the radio off and nothing to watch but the road. Organize one's thoughts. Plan ahead an evening in every detail. Walk in one's front door with one's hands and mind clean again, to not bring the graveyard into the house.

She peeled her white pantsuit from its dry cleaner's plastic. Not professional FBI field wear: it was too fussy to wear into the office, never mind trekking through the backwoods and ditches -- *and beaches* -- of America. But for a night both about death and cleanliness, about becoming clean, it was right. Bleach in a mortuary to scrub a child's death off the floor. The false clarity of fasting. Grave-clothes. White upon white upon white.

Falkner glanced at her watch; no time to shower. She stripped down to her underwear and wet a washcloth in the sink instead. It had done very well in

the field, for months on end sometimes. A shower was a privilege. It would have to do.

As she sponged off and reapplied deodorant, perfume, makeup, she noted that she hadn't eaten since lunch either. It would be a long go of it, tonight through the Kol Nidre service, tomorrow all the way until sundown. Bad tactical planning. She was already hungry.

It was all right. This year of all years, she could go a little hungrier.

The bathroom door opened, and "Es," Ben said, all aftershave and undershirt and sober creased grey pants over those thin socks that men bought to wear with their better suits. "I was about to call."

"Sorry," she said again, easier this time somehow, easy to apologize to her husband with whom there were years and years of practice, of give and take, of forgiveness. "I caught traffic on the freeway."

He gauged it somehow, from the rushedness of her voice or the way she held her head, from something she wouldn't know to read in her own skin, her own habits. "Work?" he asked, and offered her an arm for balance. She took it, and leaned on it, and slid one leg into her carefully pressed slacks. He smelled good, like soap and hair and that peculiar scent that each person had all their own. *Work is bad,* she thought. *Very bad.*

"It doesn't matter now," she said, and kissed her husband with her pants still half-on. *You're here. It's there.* This is how you made it home on time.

The traffic had lightened on 495. They made the trip to Shaare Tefila in record time, and she parked the car while Ben gathered up the High Holy Days tickets and the four Siddurim with their brown and gold covers and hustled the girls inside. Too late for good seats by a long shot, she thought, as she navigated patches of the frighteningly full parking lot, finally spotted an empty space and slid into it as another car was turning, ungainly, to try to get around a corner in time. They were too late for good seats and Deborah would want to stand on the chair to see everything, but at least they hadn't missed the opening of the service.

The building was all bustle and light. She tucked in through the front doors, heels clicking on the old flooring -- they were raising money for a new building; this one was much too small -- and caught Deborah's waving hand at the door to the back hall, which they opened into the sanctuary for the

large holiday services. "Mom!" she called, and Falkner shed her coat and took her youngest by the hand. "Daddy saved a seat for you," she said.

The girls had put Deborah's hair in two smooth braids. She was smiling. Falkner looked down for a moment, and smiled back. "Thanks, munchkin," she said, and "Mooommm," Deborah replied, aping her big sister, tugging Falkner into the tight-packed aisles.

They were halfway to the back, in the middle of a row already stuffed with people; the group of Friday night regulars and twice as many more, who only came around the High Holidays, for barmitzvahs or funerals. Deborah wiggled herself self-importantly into a chair between Ben and their last empty one, and Falkner sat down on the outside, taking her Siddur from Ben's hand wordlessly. Let out a breath.

Finally, time to stop running today. Finally home.

A shock of melody from the piano came through the speakers, and as one, the congregation broke off chatter, fidgeting, conversation, and opened their books.

They stood, sang, sat. They took the Torah from the Aron Kodesh and raised it up before the congregation, and they sang the Kol Nidre three times.

Kol Nidre Ve'esarei, Ush'vuei, Vacharamei, Vekonamei, Vekinusei, Vechinuyei. All vows, obligations, oaths, and anathemas, which we may vow, or swear, or pledge, from this Day of Atonement until the next, we do repent.

Forgive me the oaths I cannot fulfill. Forgive me the obligations I fail.

They prayed, and the rabbi closed the service with an announcement of tomorrow's study group and service times, and they went down to Sligo Creek.

When Esther Falkner was a child, this was her favourite part of the service. *Tashlich*: the mile walk in the dark along the path to running water, the distribution of the challah from the rabbi's precise hands. The line to throw it into the water, freighted with all your sins, while the Reb muttered the prayer over and over to catch each person's *amen.*

This was not the same river. But the walk was still a murmuring shuffle through the night, the stars watching from between the shadow-leaved trees, and the river bank steep and slippery with mud.

As her mother once did, Falkner reached out to hold her daughters' hands as they came within sight of the brink.

Last year Bekk had pushed her hand away, said *I won't fall* in that trademark teenage scorn all kids must have received in the mail when they sprouted their first armpit hair. This year she didn't. She held on too, and Falkner squeezed her big girl's hand and for a long moment, woods-smell and running water and the murmured sharp of Hebrew words, she thought she might never have to let go after all.

She did, of course, in the end. That too was a parent's job.

The line moved silent to the river. They moved with it.

When they reached the shore, the Rabbi passed her bread; she split it in three with two slow pulls, gave a piece each to her two children. Deborah squished hers tight in her hand; afraid of dropping it before the time was right, before she *chose.*

Aren't we all.

The river whispered around the rocks. Somewhere beyond the trees, the stars were out, and the world smelled like good earth and autumn and things that were alive and clean. The world smelled like reprieves and second chances, and the world smelled like honest prayer.

She mouthed it along. She knew the words.

Who is like You, God, who removes iniquity and overlooks transgression of the remainder of His inheritance? He does not remain angry; He desires kindness. He will return and He will be merciful to us, and He will conquer our iniquities, and He will cast them into the depths of the seas.

The children tossed theirs in fast, but they were children. Esther Falkner held silence a moment. To the water and the trees and her children she prayed *forgive me.*

There was no answer, not right away. But it wasn't about the answer. It was about the asking.

She tore good bread in her two hands and fed it to the river.

La Befana

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. December 2007

LA BEFANA. Sofia Akadiou, 32. Former UNICEF health worker who survived an attack on a village in the Central African Republic that left her blind in one eye and required the amputation of her right foot. After her release from the hospital, she began to relive childhood trauma in which she tried to shield her brother and sisters from their abusive, tyrannical mother.

She was particularly agitated by her inability to walk quietly, first with crutches, then with her prosthesis. She said to nurses and to a physical therapist, on several occasions, that her mother worked nights and required silence during the day. When reminded that her mother had died several years earlier, Akadiou apologized for her confusion. A hospital psychologist diagnosed PTSD.

After conversion, Akadiou entered the homes of her victims (usually through an unlocked entrance) and, while the parents slept, suffocated the children. Afterward, she tidied the children's rooms--hung up clothes, put away toys, straightened book shelves, pulled the bedcovers smooth and tucked them in under the mattress.

Akadiou targeted her victims in supermarkets, shopping malls, and other public places: a parent responding with anger and impatience to a child's tantrum could trigger her memories of her mother's rages. Akadiou believed that by "quieting" the child and cleaning up, she could save the child from punishment.

Poughkeepsie homicide detectives nicknamed her "La Befana" during the search for the children's killer, based on the character from Italian folklore. She was responsible for the deaths of nine children.

After taking Akadiou into custody, ACTF agents obtained family records from her childhood. When Akadiou was twelve, her younger brother died from an overdose of barbiturates. The death was ruled accidental. In light of Akadiou's trauma and subsequent acting-out of her delusion, it seems likely that Akadiou drugged her siblings to keep them quiet and out of her mother's eye.

Sleet hissed against Stephen Reyes's office window. It sounded like home: winter driven sideways off Lake Michigan and down the streets of Chicago. Through his open office door, he heard Esther Falkner venting the day's violent impulses on her keyboard (the only real proof that she had any). Daphne Worth's crepe-soled boots laid down an almost sub-audible beat on the carpet in the bullpen as she jogged down the aisle to Hafidha's sanctum. Just beyond Reyes's office door, Brady declared, "It's not a copycat. Y'all got yourselves one UNSUB, not two," and the moment of drawl told Reyes he was hearing the phone consult with Houston PD.

Each weight of paper in the file on the desk in front of him had its own voice: bond shushed against bond, tissue copies crunched and crackled. The heavy photo paper made a dull thrum, like a slack guitar string, when it flipped past his thumb.

To hear criminal investigators tell it, evidence spoke; all one had to do was listen well. But in photographs and printed records, sound was only speculation. Audio tapes of interviews carried no visual information. Video recordings of witnesses, suspects, and crime scenes had sight and sound; but they lacked the smell of bleach, the vibrating tension of the person just outside the frame, the subject's reaction when the red light went dark.

Sometimes evidence spoke like a parakeet: language without context or continuity.

Reyes turned the pages of the file (*shush, shush, crackle, shush*) until he reached the photo of Sofia Akadiou taken after her arrest. It said nothing about her face when she opened her door to Reyes and the arresting officers: how her eyes showed their whites, and her sallow skin lost what little flush it had. It didn't note her terror, not of the men on her doorstep, but of something behind her, something that made her press a finger hard to her lips, begging them to make no noise.

The house, when they searched it, was empty.

The photo couldn't tell how Akadiou had trembled and flinched in the interview room where she was cuffed to the bracket under the table, how she squeezed her eyes and mouth tight closed and shook her head hard when homicide detectives came to get a statement. They swore they asked questions. On the video of the interview, their lips move. But there are no

voices recorded, no scrape of the shifted chair, no clink of the cuffs on the metal bracket.

Akadiou's photo was mute, too, on what happened when Reyes asked that she be moved to a quiet, empty office, or when Reyes joined her there twenty minutes later sock-footed and careful to muffle the closing door. On the desk in front of her he laid a pad of wide-ruled, fibrous paper, so soft it was halfway to being cloth, and a new blue crayon.

No rattle of paper or the scratching of pencil or pen.

You know, her face had said. *You will take this weight off me. You will protect them. You will keep them safe from her.*

Evidence could only speak of what it knew. Evidence never knew everything. Justice ought to be based on more than evidence. Mercy had to be. If Sofia Akadiou had understood that, she might have been able to silence the voice inside her. The parents of nine dead children in Poughkeepsie understood it sometimes, when the quiet in their second bedrooms and backyards and the mutter of "If only I hadn't..." in their heads didn't overwhelm it.

So it was up to Reyes to understand it for them, to keep faith with Akadiou's silent charge to him.

You will protect them. You will keep them safe.

He listened to the sounds his team made as they did their work, and hoped his best would be enough.

Ice

Ashton, Virginia, August 2008

Special Agent Lau kept her promise.

This amazes Henry Clark. Reyes knows because Henry tells him so, every time Reyes comes to "visit."

Henry Clark isn't his real name. Or, rather, it isn't the name he was born with. It's the name on his dogtags. Or, rather, not *his* dogtags, since CLARK HENRY J died in Vietnam and is buried in a cemetery in Florida along with at least three generations of his ancestors. Todd checked that, and double-checked it, and nearly (he claims) got brained by an angry old lady with a shotgun for daring to suggest that she might have buried the wrong body. "Open casket funeral," he says gloomily on his return. "She says she doesn't know what happened to his dogtags. Says maybe her daughter took them, but she hasn't talked to her daughter since the Summer of Love and doesn't have the least idea where she might be." Beat. But Reyes is waiting for it, because Reyes knows Todd. "Also, the Henry J. Clark who died in Vietnam--the J stands for Jericho, by the way, because I know you were wondering--was African-American."

The Henry Clark in Idlewood is not. He's fair-skinned, blue-eyed. He's probably older than Henry J. Clark would be, although that's another thing they can't tell for sure. Henry doesn't know, any more than he knows what his name was before it was Henry Clark.

He lost a lot of things to the ice, he tells Reyes.

His file lists some of them: three toes, part of his right ear, patches of skin on hands and feet that are scar-shiny and insensate. The cognitive impairment may be the result of hypothermia, or it may be the result of something else. Likewise the fissures and failures in his memory, long-term and short-term both. He can name most of the presidents, but has no idea where he was born. If he ever had a family, he doesn't know who they are, and Reyes can't find any evidence that they're looking for him.

How he ended up in Minnesota is anybody's guess.

Idlewood is the best thing that's ever happened to Henry Clark. His room is comfortable, the food is good, the nurses are nice to him. "And they let me have two blankets," he says to Reyes, blue eyes wide. "They say I can have three if I need them, and I don't want to be greedy, but sometimes I do."

"It's all right, Henry," Reyes always says. "There are plenty of blankets for everyone."

Even in Idlewood, even in the summer, it's hard for Henry Clark to stay warm. He wears sweatshirts over flannel shirts over turtlenecks, long underwear and flannel lined jeans, two pairs of socks and enormous fleece-lined moccasins. He has a wool hat, and the nurses say he sleeps in it, but he won't wear it in front of Reyes; he says it's rude to wear a hat indoors.

The therapists have taught him to knit, and Henry nearly bursts with pride when he tells Reyes he's knitted himself a scarf. Reyes admires it. It's purple and magenta and wildly uneven, and it's already unraveling in places, but it's something Henry made to keep himself warm, and that makes it beautiful.

Next month on *Shadow Unit*...

These were familiar; morgue photographs. Bodies laid out, false-looking and still, on careful metal tables. Skin drained of something; clinically it was probably the blush of blood moving from cell to cell, but Esther Falkner always thought of it as the soul. There were no marks; no contusions. In the headshot, the blonde was thin and pale as Sleeping Beauty.

And then click, the full-body shot.

Under the pale green sheet Cecily Marshall's ribs were enumerated, sharp as starfish. Her hipbones splayed from discoloured skin like growths. The legs tapered down like stick-figure limbs, ridiculously long and gangly without their flesh. The curve of her jawbone, the skull was clearly visible under what had once been grinning red cheeks.

She looked like a famine victim. She looked like-

--naked protruding ribs, his spidery arms, his hair, the jeans that sagged on his jutting hipbones, his bare feet--

There was a little scrape as the wheel of Villette's chair locked, snagged on its own awkward joints, and tugged at the carpet. Don't, Falkner thought, even as her head already turned to glance over. Everyone else in the room was looking at him too. They all looked away just as quickly. Clockwork.

He didn't react. He stared at the picture of the dead girl so hard he might well be memorizing it. He sat so still he trembled.

Charles Villette knew all the ways to die of starvation.

*

"Local PD is investigating the family for Munchausen-by-proxy or abuse," Lau said. "They're holding the second body for autopsy. There's a detective there who kicked this up for assistance. He's read about suicide clusters and seems to feel out of his league. Good thing he did. It tripped the flags and came down to us."

"And the first body?" Falkner pressed. Get through this, through the next minute and they could be back on topic again. They could be a team around a table doing their jobs.

"Would have to be exhumed," Lau said.

Someone had to ask the question. Esther Falkner counted a slow five beats down, silent. She hadn't hit two before Daniel Brady leaned back and said "So why's this on our desk?"She let out a breath. It was good, the supervisory part of her noted, to have people around who weren't so terribly invested in looking like they already knew.

Lau slid the file shut so gently it didn't even rustle. "Cecily Marshall was sixteen years old and died of a massive heart attack. They weighed the body in at eighty-nine pounds." A pause; maybe presentational, maybe genuine disgust and grief. "At her last physical in May she weighed one hundred and forty five."

"Oh," Hafidha Gates said, muffled and involuntary, and hunched over herself like a wound.

"Either we have someone sucking the weight off teenage girls," Worth began.

It hung in the air for a moment. Esther Falkner took aim and shot it down.

"Or we have a plague of gammas," she said.

-- from "Sugar," by Leah Bobet

Consumption

Ashton, VA, January 2008

Reyes wishes they wouldn't call her Mrs. Chow.

It's disrespectful, for one thing, and surely the woman has little enough dignity left already. Not to mention that there *is* something faintly ludicrous about her manifestation. In a period of between eighteen and twenty-six hours, she ate her husband, her three children, her elderly parents, her children's gerbils (number unknown), and part of her mother's cocker spaniel. There's no need to compound the injury with the insult of a demeaning nickname.

Mrs. Chow sounds like something out of a comic book, and if there's anything Eileen Cho isn't, it's a comic book villain.

They did interviews, he and Todd, with neighbors, with friends, with the staff of the local organic co-op where Mrs. Cho had volunteered, with priest and congregation of the Episcopalian church where the Chos had worshipped, and the picture was close to unanimous: a perfectly pleasant, perfectly ordinary woman. She'd worked to put her husband through law school and then had stayed home with the children (and eventually her parents), although her friends said she'd been talking about going back to school.

"In what?" Reyes said.

"Oh, I don't think she knew," said one friend.

Another, leaning closer, said in hushed tones, "She said once she wanted to be a nutritionist." Under the circumstances, Reyes couldn't even blame her for saying it as if Mrs. Cho had announced she wanted to be a Satanist.

The priest, a soft-handed, soft-eyed man in his early forties, had been almost incoherent with distress. "She was a regular communicant," he blurted finally.

Take, eat; this is my body.

Todd blinked. (Reyes remembers it distinctly because he so rarely sees Solomon Todd taken aback.) Then Todd said gently, "We don't believe there

was any, ah, religious dimension to Mrs. Cho's aberration."

But how would they have known?

There had been no chance to interview Eileen Cho, no chance to ask about the importance of food in her life. No chance to ask about traumas in childhood, periods of privation. An eating disorder? He wonders about bulimia and binge eating, but he doesn't even have enough evidence for a responsible speculation. All he and Todd could resurrect was the image she had shown to people outside her family. Everyone who could have told them more was dead. Most of them, Mrs. Cho had eaten.

She was interrupted in her consumption of the cocker spaniel by a very very nervous rookie cop, and his testimony was clear:

She looked up, and I saw there was blood all down her front and all around her mouth. It was thick as spaghetti sauce. And then she fell over like I'd shot her. But I never fired my weapon. Not even a warning shot.

By the time Reyes made the scene--and if God exists, he's got a mean sense of humor, because, really, did the day Eileen Cho went over the top have to be the only day that year that Stephen Reyes was even *in* Pasadena?--Mrs. Cho had already had a string of grand mal seizures and been taken to the hospital. A stroke, but whether it was a result of her conversion, or whether perhaps a microstroke the day before had been the cause, there was no way now to tell. The rookie cop and his backup were all standing in the street, showing the whites of their eyes like spooked horses. And the dog was crying in the backyard.

Poor stupid cocker spaniel. It tried to wag its tail when Reyes approached. And he stroked its head, tugged gently on one floppy ear, said "Good dog, good dog," while he drew his gun.

How the dog had lived that long, he didn't even know. She'd started eating in the middle.

Take, eat; this is my body.

And now Eileen Cho's body is in Idlewood. Aside from the aftereffects of her massive stroke, it is perfectly healthy, the body of a woman in her active middle-age. Her metabolism runs hot, as the metabolisms of betas and gammas do, but not abnormally so *(Can you have a norm of the abnormal?*

Todd wrote in the margin of Reyes' report: *Also, how much wood would a woodchuck chuck?)*. Her "aberration" has not repeated itself.

Most of the time, her body seems empty to Reyes, even though it moves and reacts. Sometimes it answers questions. Sometimes the answers even make sense. But they tell him nothing about who Eileen Cho was before the anomaly got its claws into her. This body contains nothing, or almost nothing, of the person Eileen Cho was, the person who went to church every Sunday, volunteered twenty hours a week at her co-op, wanted to be a nutritionist. He's not even sure, really, who he's talking to. Is it some echo of Eileen Cho, as the moon echoes the sun's old light? Is it a person, no matter how damaged, no matter that it does not remember who it is? Is it the thing that ate its young, the thing that did not kill the dog before beginning to devour it? He wonders--and he knows Todd wonders, although they try hard not to talk about this particular unanswered question--if the dog was typical of her M.O.

Did she eat them all that way, still alive and starting from the middle?

It's not a question he can ask Mrs. Cho, either. He can't ask her about anything that isn't there in the room with them; she has no ability to distinguish between "past" and "present," no ability for abstract thought of any kind. Even at her most coherent, on the days when there's almost a human being behind her eyes, she never knows his name. She never knows her own name. He asks her, "Who are you?" Sometimes she doesn't answer. Sometimes she gives a random noun: "soap" or "table." Most often, echolalic, she says, "Who who who."

She may not remember her aberration at all, and that is, in fact, the most likely hypothesis. But sometimes he thinks she does remember. Sometimes he thinks something in her is laughing at him.

Which is nonsense, and he knows it. Subterfuge is as far beyond her reach as the moon.

And those are her "good" days, when she can feed herself and seems to recognize her nurses. On bad days, she reminds Reyes of the old joke about how turtles divide the world into two categories: Food and Not-Food. Except for Mrs. Cho, there's no division. She eats facial tissues, her own hair, dirt from the potted plants. She has been interrupted trying to eat

plastic cups, pillowcases; once a nurse came in and found her gnawing on the upholstery of her room's only chair. On other days, she seems not to know how to eat at all. Even if they put the food in her mouth, it just falls out again.

Is she refusing food when she does that?

Reyes doesn't know; the Idlewood doctors don't know. If she is refusing food, should they let her die? It wouldn't take long. And, crucially, she has the right. Reyes itches to say yes, to let her go in the only way he can, but two things hold him back:

1. The possibility that they can learn something from a living gamma--even one as tenuously alive as Eileen Cho--that they will never learn from the dead ones. He has a crushing weight of dead gammas, both suspected and confirmed, a filing cabinet full of autopsy reports. Living gammas are a rare commodity, and he can't bring himself to waste one, even while he despises himself for thinking of a human being as a research tool.

2. The possibility that leaving her to starve will trigger another aberration. How much of Idlewood's staff could she eat before she was stopped? *How much wood would a woodchuck chuck?*

And then there's the superstitious reason, the one he won't admit even to Todd: his feeling, when he looks at Eileen Cho's husk of a body, that the anomaly *wants* him to kill her. That it has offered her up as a sacrifice expressly in order to force him to take it. That having consumed her, and consumed through her, it now wants her to be consumed--metaphorically, if it can't manage better.

Projecting, Stephen, he scolds himself. *There's no evidence that the anomaly is AWARE. There's certainly no evidence that it's aware of YOU.*

But still, no matter how hard he fights the stupid, tired impulse to anthropomorphize, Eileen Cho's all-but-empty body looks like a taunt.

Take, eat; this is my body.

Reyes *really* wishes they wouldn't call her Mrs. Chow.

Safekeeping

Ashton, Virginia, June 2007

Joseph Lawrence Hakes hasn't seen a live human face in three years. Daniel Brady wonders if that's better than the only possible alternative.

We should never have brought that one in, he thinks, not for the first time.

Brady watches on four high-res monitors at the guard station as Hakes finishes dinner. Hakes can't dawdle over his food, not when it's served in a potato-starch-based paper dish that begins to soften as soon as it's filled. His shovel-shaped spoon is waxed cardboard, like a Dixie cup. It's a place setting reserved for the most dangerous sons of bitches in Idlewood, the ones who know what they are and like it just fine, thank you.

Other residents eat off (break-resistant) china with normal forks and spoons. The doctors on staff say normal is calming, reassuring, safe. People who feel safe are more willing to consider the possibility that, just maybe, the thing that prompts them to hurt and kill and destroy might be wrong.

Besides, Brady reasons, anything else would remind the residents they're big damn scary monsters. That's not the kind of pep rally a place like Idlewood needs. Brady suspects the doctors share his reasoning and just won't admit it.

The food itself is pretty good. Most of the inmates haven't been sentenced in open court by a jury of their peers, so they can't justifiably be tortured at mealtimes. Besides, the nutritionist and the supervising cook are part of the research staff. How to feed a gamma, and why, and whether it makes a difference in what they are: that's their part of the experiment.

Hakes swallows the last of his chicken stroganoff over brown rice and pushes the dirty utensils through a hatch in the wall. Beside Brady, a woman in the discreet gray uniform of Idlewood's security staff taps a button that locks the hatch and turns the light on the console next to it from red to green.

This guard station is out of the direct line of sight (imagining lines of sight that pass through heavily-reinforced walls) of any of the cameras in Hakes's room. When Hakes stares unblinking at a camera lens, which he often does,

he's not staring in the direction of the person at the console. The meal hatch doesn't lead straight to anywhere; the belt that rolls food from the kitchen to that opening angles in the middle. Standing in Hakes's room, there's no way to tell what vector has another human being at the end of it.

Overkill, probably. Nothing in Hakes's mythology or past murders suggests he can induce acute hemorrhaging in someone he can't see. But nobody wants to be the person at the guard station who learns the evaluation is wrong--who bleeds out through the ears, nose, mouth, anus, and eye sockets before he or she can get out of range.

And if Hakes can't do it now, who knows? He might learn. *We're just making sure*, Brady thinks, and feels his mouth twist as if he'd said it out loud.

Joe Lawrence Hakes is a *monster*. There's no "sure" where he and things like him are concerned.

"Interviewing Bloody Larry," says the guard beside him. It's the first time she's spoken since he introduced himself and told her what he was there for. "Guess you drew the short straw."

Her voice brings his attention back to now. The guard is tall and broad-shouldered, with cropped, curly black hair. Below her short-sleeved uniform shirt, her arms are ribbed with muscle. Her face shows sympathetic disgust, as if he'd told her about a container lost in the back of the refrigerator for six months.

As if his next half-hour can be thrown out, washed out, deodorized, and forgotten.

Brady looks at the monitors, where Hakes sits easy on the edge of his bed, his small, bony hands clasped on his lap, staring up and to the left at the camera in the corner.

"If I didn't do it, somebody else would have to," he tells the guard, and leans forward for the microphone switch.

Truth

Ashton, Virginia, September 2008

Approximation: One in five children experiences some sort of sexual abuse. The rate is higher for girls than for boys.

Fact: Ninety percent of childhood sexual abuse victims never tell.

Fact: The most commonly reported perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse are fathers and stepfathers.

Fact: Ninety-five percent of such abusers were abused themselves as children.

Fact: Media portrayals aside, most abused children do not go on to abuse others.

Fact: Child sexual abuse is more common in alcoholic families, possibly because alcoholic families have permeable boundaries and confused parent-child relationships.

Fact: Children sexually abused by trusted authority figures grow up with broken boundaries and fractured senses of themselves. Consequences include biting, rocking, eating disorders, incontinence, dissociation, substance abuse, psychopathology, and inappropriately sexualized behavior.

These are the fact about abuse.

Fact. Sure. It sounds like hard statistics, the sorts of things Nikki Lau's colleague Chaz might spout without pausing... until the pretty, gaunt, brown-haired victim of that abuse came around the interview table and tried to curl up in his lap and nibble on his ear.

Fact: When she thinks about Jessi Kelly, Lau's fingernails pinch her palms. Abuse. She wants to shake somebody, slap them. Scream, *Call it what it is. Long-term sexual exploitation. Slavery. Rape.*

Fact: Jessica Kelly's father--the rapist--and her mother--the collaborator--do not come to visit her at the Idlewood Institute For Mental Health.

Fact: Jessi Kelly is twenty-six years old as of last August. She'll have been in Arkham for nine years, come April. A third of her life. She will never see

the sky, except through barred windows, again.

Fact: Jessi Kelly is one of the good guys. She believes it deeply, passionately, with the conviction of the adolescent and the insane. She believes she is a superhero. She believes that she saved both herself and the man who--between the age of five and the age of seventeen (twelve years, half as long again as she's been in Idlewood)-- repeatedly raped her. She believes she saved them both from the monsters who wanted to destroy them. Who wanted to keep them apart.

Facts are not truths, though, and Nikki Lau knows the truth about sexual abuse.

Truth: This is why Nikki Lau goes to visit Jessi Kelly in her internment. *Interment.* Both.

Every month. Without fail.

Charm

Ashton, Virginia, August 2006

Clemson McCain is no Hannibal Lecter.

Reyes saw *The Silence of the Lambs* in a theater in...he forgets where, exactly, somewhere out in the Southwest, playing hookey from an interminable professional conference. What he'd found most disturbing about it was the way that everyone involved, from the scriptwriter to the cameraman, seemed to be slightly in love with Hannibal Lecter, and he had even amused himself that night by trying to decide, if Lecter were a gamma, what his manifestation would be. *Persuasiveness*, Reyes had thought and added that to his mental list of anomaloid presentations that he wanted to be particularly wary of. If he could think of it, so could the anomaly.

Lecter, of course, had the great advantage of being played by Anthony Hopkins, whereas most serial killers, anomalous and otherwise, whom Reyes has profiled and interviewed, chased and caught and killed, are doing well to aspire to Billy Bob Thornton. Clemson McCain looks like an extra out of *Deliverance* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (two more movies that Reyes' junior agents would never believe he's seen, much less enjoyed), but that's as misleading as giving a run-of-the-mill serial killer Anthony Hopkins' voice and presence.

Clemson McCain is not a stupid man.

He's been in Idlewood for nearly forty years, far longer than there has been any kind of a theory about what he is or how to deal with him. Reyes has read, and reread, and reread, the case files; he knows just how much pure dumb luck was involved in McCain's capture. *Who is the patron saint of FBI agents?* he'd written in the margin of his photocopy. Under it, Todd had answered, *St. Gildas, guardian angel of idiots.* Agents Demmer and Stone had brought McCain in almost despite themselves; at least they'd known enough to insist that a federal prison wouldn't do, a mental hospital wouldn't do. Stone in particular had put his job on the line to get McCain into a cage that would hold him.

And there he had sat, Clemson McCain. No maroon eyes, no six-fingered hands, no mesmerizing voice. Just a big, lumpish guy with a moon face and

bad teeth and the broad callused hands of a working man. His eyes are little, set well back in his head, gray and glinting. It's a trite cliché, Todd had pointed out, irritated at the failure of life not to imitate art, to call them the eyes of a pig, and Reyes had said, Yes, Sol, but remember. Pigs are *smart.*

Reyes knows that Clemson McCain is biding his time. He asked him once what he was waiting for, and McCain thought about it and finally said, *I don't know, Stephen.* And then he smiled, behind the inch of Plexiglass that always and forever stood between Clemson McCain and the world, and added, *But I'll know it when it comes.*

Disintegration

Ashton, VA, 2007 - 2008

They are putting Mr. Friendly back together.

*

Roger Weathers was sixty-two years old, childless, and widowed when he broke apart.

He was sixty-one years old and recently bereaved of an arthritic cat named Minnow when the neighbourhood children began to disappear.

In his prior life--and Stephen Reyes knows all about his prior life, because Roger Weathers will gladly discuss anything in interview except those missing children--he was a retired public librarian living in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, active in his local Quaker meeting. He was kind; never raised his voice. He was good with children. *A pity*, the neighbourhood mothers said, before the investigation fixed firmly upon him; *Roger and Betty never could have their own.*

As best as the ACTF can tell, a group of neighbourhood children playing street hockey in the cul-de-sac where Weathers lived knocked their ball into his back yard and, when they went after it, neglected to close the gate. Minnow, the last cat Betty Weathers took in before her death at fifty-six of ovarian cancer, escaped into the road and was found two days later, hit by a car the next block over.

The neighbourhood children helped him put up Minnow's missing posters in the two days before her discovery. Two weeks later, the first boy vanished.

They do not know if he broke before or after Stephen Reyes and Solomon Todd found him, keening and wailing, in front of the jar of human eyeballs in his refrigerator.

He was the first one who came quietly.

*

Dwayne George, Tyler O'Brien, Joshua Chanku, Brandon Meyer, and Daniel Li.

Reyes recites the names of the dead boys to himself every time he goes to take Roger Weathers' testimony. The team has nicknamed him well; their Mr. Friendly always says please and thank you, smiles sincerely at his interrogators, and does what he can to make them feel welcome. In Idlewood more than anywhere else, all doors open to courtesy, or at least, all privilege levels. There is not one black mark on his institutional behavioural record. Roger Weathers alone, of all the Idlewood inmates, has supervised grounds privileges.

He is also the second-last interview on a new agent's tour of Idlewood, running just behind Joseph Lawrence Hakes. Gammas like Weathers present their own unique challenges. It is too easy, Reyes feels, for another agent to forget that this man killed five children.

The first time Reyes asks about the children, Weathers trembles. "I'm worried about them," he says, not confidingly but stark with concern. The worry is visible on the video, the way his cheerful demeanor clouds up. "You still have someone looking out there, don't you?"

"For what?" Reyes asks. It's a chilly day, mid-March, in the narrow gap between the annual shutdown of Idlewood's ancient hot water radiator heating system and the actual advent of spring. Weathers is wearing an old navy cardigan. His wife, he'd mentioned, knitted it for him before she died, and he spends the interview wrapping it around himself like armor. Reyes has put all these details in his notes. Initial impressions are useful, sometimes. He rereads them when he watches the videos, late nights in D.C..

"The one who was hurting them," Weathers replies. The camera does not move. His eyes are uplifted unto Reyes's best poker face, from whence he hopes will come his help. "You must have someone looking, right?"

Dwayne George, Reyes writes in his notes, three times to underscore the point, and asks the next question.

*

"I couldn't have done that," Roger Weathers says the second time Reyes brings up the children. This time it's April, with the trees in full bud and bursting outside Idlewood's reinforced windows. "I don't know if I've told

you this--" and he has "--but I adhere to the Peace Testimony. I don't even kill *spiders*."

Roger Weathers is distraught. Reyes is upsetting him.

"We knocked on your door on July the twenty-first," Reyes repeats. He doesn't need notes to tell this story anymore. "There was no answer. Agent Todd and I proceeded to the kitchen door, and it was open. You were on the kitchen floor."

"This never happened," Weathers says. "You're making this up."

"You were in front of the refrigerator," Reyes says. Pauses. "We need to know where the bodies are."

"You've got this all wrong," Weathers tells him, and then stubbornly refuses to speak a word.

Tyler O'Brien, Reyes tells himself, and goes through it again.

*

The third time, Reyes brings pictures.

The smile slides off Roger Weathers's face the moment his failing eyes focus on them. Crime scene photos: the fridge, the jar, the 1970s brown tile of the kitchen floor that's since been pried up, fished under, the foundation broken in a hunt for the scraps of five children's bodies. Reyes slaps down another one, another, deals them out like a hand of cards. Five children's faces. Five dead kids.

Weathers's hand reaches out, touches the image of the jar lid as if he can't believe it's there. Recoils.

And he starts to scream.

The orderlies rush in, hands low, ready for anything. "Get clear, sir--" one says, a white-uniformed balding man built like a *luchador*. Stephen Reyes complies.

"Where are they, Roger?" he asks, low and calm.

Weathers is still screaming. He flings himself backwards, off his chair, bounces his own head off the hard stone floor. The orderlies move in but he's up too fast, faster than a man of his age should be, and he throws

himself away from that jar, away from the smiling school pictures, crawls into the opposite corner and presses his face against the seam between concrete and glass until he realizes it won't give, won't let him farther away.

DwayneGeorgeTylerO'BrienJoshuaChanku, Reyes repeats as Roger Weathers flings himself against the mirrored wall again, and again, and again.

*

It is sublimely difficult to tell a human being that they're a bad person. This does not just apply to gammas. Every day, people of all faiths, creeds, genders, races, and situations are putting contortionists to shame to create a world where they're the good guy. "People have an infinite capacity for self-delusion, Stephen," Casey Ramachandran tells him, as if Reyes doesn't know that.

"So you think he's telling the truth," Reyes says. Some of his team do. This is August, the day when the DID-based therapy has been officially put on the table. He is in Ramachandran's office. There is no video of this occasion, and there are no notes. His hand, throughout this meeting, is fussing for want of a pen.

The theory is this: If Weathers has isolated the anomalous portion of him somewhere far away, wadded it up like a cyst, a used tissue, perhaps it can be broken open and reintegrated. Perhaps they can get from it the truth.

If he's telling the truth.

"I don't know," says the doctor, and flips the pages of their inch-thick psych profile back and forth, back and forth.

Reyes isn't sure either if Weathers is lying, if this partitioning is his adaptation or the anomaly's. People have walled away worse things: genocide, torture, abuse. There is such thing as rehabilitation. Sometimes people develop coping mechanisms. Ways to keep themselves sane. Some of his team think that this is what's happened. Roger Weathers has adapted, and they should let him be.

And sometimes the anomaly finds ways to not be studied.

Brandon Meyer, Reyes thinks, like a mantra, like a sigh. "Try the integration therapy," he tells Dr. Ramachandran, and lets himself out.

*

They have tried dogs. They have tried echolocation in the Weathers backyard, his basement, around his properties and the public parks of nearby St. Paul. A twenty-mile search was engaged when the children disappeared, and no traces were found. There was nothing human in Roger Weathers's digestive tract when he was taken into custody, and besides, as Todd pointed out, there would be the matter of the bones.

Nearly seven years on, nothing has turned up the bodies. Without his testimony it is unlikely that Dwayne George, Tyler O'Brien, Joshua Chanku, Brandon Meyer, or Daniel Li will ever be found. There is a memorial donated by the community to their families, but a memorial is not the same.

More to the point, Stephen Reyes counted eleven eyeballs in the jar.

*

And it's March again now, brisk and chilly, the week between the quieting of Idlewood's heating system and the full-on start of spring. Reyes does not interview Roger Weathers anymore. They have a specialist for that now, someone who sits with him every other day and talks about disassociation and memories. She talks about Minnow and his dead wife. She talks about other people's children, and what it feels like to see them when you can't have your own. She talks about other people's carelessness, about boundaries. About repressing one's anger.

Mr. Friendly expresses anger now. He snaps at the orderlies. He has lost his grounds privileges for throwing his lunch tray across the room and giving his attending nurse a cut that required five stitches. It will get worse before it gets better, his therapist assures them in the monthly meetings that she, Dr. Ramachandran, and Reyes hold. Balzac was right: Courtesy is only a thin veneer on the general selfishness.

Some months, in a vain sort of hope, they show him the picture.

"You're a bad person," Ramachandran says as he watches Weathers scream and seize, as the orderlies rush in and grab each of his flailing arms, inject the sedative. This has happened nearly three times this month. Dr. Ramachandran worries that one day he'll trip himself--he's on calcium supplements for osteoporosis--and break bones.

It is mid-March. Roger Weathers turns seventy in June. There is no data on the natural life expectancy of a gamma.

Daniel Li.

"Yes," says Reyes, two steps back from the glass. He is tired, but his gaze never wavers. "I know."

*

They are putting Mr. Friendly back together. Stephen Reyes attends monthly, on the other side of that crack-proof mirrored glass, to watch them, to hear the screams.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Aug. 28th, 2008 – Sep. 28th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

thanks, brain!

- Aug. 28th, 2008 at 12:28 PM

I woke up at 3 am with my heart pounding, from a totally surreal nightmare about trying to get rid of a live grenade that somehow kept returning, like a boomerang or like a big cartoon bomb as experienced by my hapless Warner Brothers alter ego. And it would never go off, but I knew it was going to, anyway, and for some reason I had no strength to throw it hard enough to make it go away.

And you know how sometimes you're awake but not really, in that some part of the forebrain is functioning, but the sleep paralysis is still weighing your limbs down and your cognition is muddled and drunken and surreal? I must have been very deep under when I woke myself up, because that lasted for a subjective millennium, while my hindbrain was screaming that *a serial killer is in the room with you and you need to get away now!*

Anyway, for like fifteen minutes after I finally really woke up, I couldn't shake the sensation that somebody else was there.

This is what I get for case reports before bedtime, isn't it?

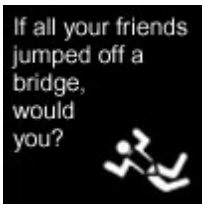
Really wish I knew what my subconscious thought it was symbolizing with that tar baby hand grenade.

- Current Mood: sleepy, for some strange reason
- Current Music:Ane Brun - To Let Myself Go

August 31st, 2008

adorable and overhyped, mark II

- Aug. 31st, 2008 at 8:28 AM



Thou shalt not covet.

I got to play with one of the new ones yesterday. *Siiiiggggghhhhhh.* Total cowbell.

And in to work. It's back to "It's a good thing I don't have a girlfriend, or she'd dump me for never being around." Admittedly, work right now consists of sitting there waiting for the phone to ring and knowing it probably won't, but it feels wrong not to be there when there's any chance at all I might be needed.

- Current Mood: oooo! Shiny!!!
- Current Music:Pigeons singing morning songs whil I put my shoes on. There goes another holiday weekend.

[Private] ...

- Aug. 31st, 2008 at 9:53 AM

You ever wonder if maybe--only sometimes--the universe *is* benevolent, and listening?

I believe I am a climber.

- Current Mood: stunned
- Current Music:a coworker listening to NPR

Tags:

- gratitude,

synchronicity

September 1st, 2008

Seeing as how our weekend got shifted--

- Sep. 1st, 2008 at 12:51 PM

Hey, **trollcatz** and **0metotchtli** and **ace_cub_reportr** and associated life forms--

My advanced cognitive abilities lead me to believe that we're all going to crash at home tonight once Mom springs us.

But I'm planning on making eggplant parm and I have two giant aubergines, which is too much even for me. Which means that I will have leftover fried eggplant. Which means that tomorrow evening I could make some beer-crust pizzas with eggplant and goat cheese and roasted garlic and sundried

tomatoes and we could all sit around in somebody's living room and watch movies and drink beer and eat pizza. And it would be *almost exactly like a holiday.* Except better, because we wouldn't have to get up Wednesday morning to commute when everybody else does.

How say you all?

- Current Mood: hopeful
- Current Music:Andrew Bird, recorded live, claiming his band wants to be called The Electric Platypus <3<3<3

September 7th, 2008

Sunday night, during the Mythbusters marathon, while waiting for AB's new show...

- Sep. 7th, 2008 at 7:01 PM

(Nothing says friendship like a little internet genocide.)

[17:34] **cvillette**: http://www.crazymonkeygames.com/fullscreen.php?game=Pandemic-2
[17:34] **cvillette**: That will kill your evening
[17:38] **0metotchtli**: ooh. genocide.
[17:39] **cvillette**: mass extinction.
[17:39] **0metotchtli**: *goes to create the Canadian virus hegemony*
[17:40] **0metotchtli**: *caused by maple syrup deficiency*
[17:40] **cvillette**: I have a parasite in Peru
[17:45] **0metotchtli**: (that's right, little plaguebearers. go sneeze on people.)
[17:46] *** Tasha the Even More Merciless has joined the chat.
[17:46] **cvillette**: Parasites spread sloooowwwly
[17:46] **cvillette**: but it's nearly invisible.
[17:46] **0metotchtli**: I have a virus.
[17:47] **cvillette**: I can infect the whole world before they even know it's

there
[17:47] **cvillette**: And then mutate!
[17:47] **0metotchtli**: I am concentrating on infectivity, and not trying to kill anyone yet.
[17:47] **cvillette**: mutate!
[17:47] **0metotchtli**: We'll kill 'em all once it's past the CDC. :-D
[17:47] **cvillette**: 140 infected and no one yet the wiser.
[17:47] **cvillette**: breeeed, little parasite
[17:48] **0metotchtli**: 8695 infected.
[17:48] **0metotchtli**: One of those guys is getting on a plane eventually.
[17:48] **0metotchtli**: *bides time*
[17:49] **cvillette**: see, that's a problem with starting in Peru
[17:49] **cvillette**: no transit
[17:49] **0metotchtli**: I'm in China.
[17:49] **0metotchtli**: It's like virus paradise.
[17:49] **cvillette**: I just have to let it sit there like a boil until somebody hikes to Brazil
[17:49] **0metotchtli**: Oh, first death!
[17:49] **cvillette**: woo!
[17:49] TheNotABoy: *infects Western Europe with Vermis Mysteriis*
[17:50] **0metotchtli**: Nice, made it to India.
[17:50] **cvillette**: 157 infected...
[17:50] **cvillette**: see, you got all the luck.
[17:50] **0metotchtli**: Oh, densely populated Asian continent, you do right by me.
[17:50] **cvillette**: Easy!
[17:50] **cvillette**: At least in South America I have dirty water to work with
[17:50] TheNotABoy: I only have 21 infected, and no dead.
[17:50] **0metotchtli**: Oh, into the middle east too.
[17:50] **cvillette**: 187 infected!
[17:50] **0metotchtli**: Keep flying, folks.
[17:51] **cvillette**: We are now a waterborne parasite.
[17:51] **cvillette**: bwahahahahahhahahaha
[17:51] **0metotchtli**: Wow, Greenland preemptively shut down its shipyards.
[17:51] **0metotchtli**: Bastards.
[17:52] **cvillette**: Damn you, Greenland.

[17:52] **0metotchtli**: This isn't even a cold-weather bacterium!
[17:52] TheNotABoy: Flourish, my insect carriers!
[17:53] **0metotchtli**: (ohhh. airborne.)
[17:53] **0metotchtli**: (that's right.)
[17:53] TheNotABoy: Once my vermis mysteriis is done, then I'll put on my Dr. Ain hat.
[17:53] **cvillette**: *snrch*
[17:53] **0metotchtli**: Aw, they're making a vaccine now.
[17:53] **0metotchtli**: Suckers.
[17:53] **cvillette**: Airborne is good.
[17:53] **0metotchtli**: I have drug resistance.
[17:53] **cvillette**: See, they're on to you
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: they are. :-(
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: I need to fly lower here.
[17:54] **cvillette**: The world is blissfully unaware of their Peruvian peril.
[17:54] TheNotABoy: I've got drug resistance 3, but my symptoms are very minor right now.
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: They're closing airports in Argentina.
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: (don't cry for me, Argentina)
[17:54] TheNotABoy: I figure, infect people, then bring out the serious symptoms.
[17:54] **cvillette**: The world has no idea I'm here
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: There, I got rid of the sores.
[17:54] **cvillette**: Lurking
[17:54] **0metotchtli**: That was probably overreaching.
[17:55] **cvillette**: being passed through their food and water
[17:55] **0metotchtli**: ...hee, Peru just closed its borders.
[17:55] **0metotchtli**: I'm like "too late for you, guys."
[17:55] **0metotchtli**: "The Platypus Peruvian Peril is amongst you."
[17:55] Gail The Merciless: *has started a North African parasite*
[17:56] TheNotABoy: Oh no! Western Europe has widespread flooding.
[17:56] **cvillette**: My stealth is unmatched!
[17:56] TheNotABoy: *should have purchased moisture resistance*
[17:56] **cvillette**: I'm buying virulence.
[17:56] **cvillette**: Then resistance.
[17:56] **cvillette**: Then we sit back and wait.

[17:56] **cvillette**: MUahahahahahahahahahahahahah
[17:56] Gail The Merciless: *has infected 13 people*
[17:57] **cvillette**: One more evolution point for insect transmission....
[17:57] **cvillette**: one more...
[17:57] TheNotABoy: I have 169 people, no deaths.
[17:57] **0metotchtli**: Oh, Western Europe's starting to freak.
[17:57] **0metotchtli**: *has offed 800k Europeans*
[17:57] **cvillette**: Wabbit is SARS
[17:57] **cvillette**: I'm syphilis.
[17:57] **cvillette**: ...you know, that's kind of eerily appropriate.
[17:58] **0metotchtli**: Sarrrrrrrrrs.
[17:58] **0metotchtli**: (avast!)
[17:58] Gail The Merciless: still killing no one
[17:58] **cvillette**: Come on, give me the evolution point, baby. You know you wanna.
[17:58] TheNotABoy: I'm flying under the radar.
[17:59] **0metotchtli**: Russia's dumb.
[17:59] TheNotABoy: Which is the nice way of saying "I'm slow."
[17:59] **0metotchtli**: "Oh, the Wabbit's only killed a million people, maybe we should shut down transit now."
[17:59] **0metotchtli**: YOU FOOLS!!!!
[17:59] **cvillette**: Hah!
[17:59] TheNotABoy: Airborn, baby!
[17:59] **0metotchtli**: COWER BEFORE THE FIST OF DOOOOM!!!
[17:59] **cvillette**: There's my insect transmission.
[17:59] TheNotABoy: Damn you, Richards!
[17:59] **cvillette**: Mosquitoes are coming for you.
[17:59] **cvillette**: Vaccine, Erik?
[17:59] **0metotchtli**: (we are now also waterborne)
[18:00] TheNotABoy: No, I was just joining Hafs's Doom speech.
[18:00] TheNotABoy: I'm only in 4 digit infections with no deaths, they won't bother with a vaccine.
[18:00] **cvillette**: I'm still stranded in a Latin American backwater with no transportation.
[18:01] **cvillette**: Come on, buggies. Leap the border to Brazil.
[18:01] Tasha the Even More Merciless: I'm in Japan

[18:01] Tasha the Even More Merciless: and up to 72K, but no deaths.
[18:01] **0metotchtli**: They have 29 days until they get their vaccine.
[18:01] **0metotchtli**: I don't think anyone will be left to use it by then.
[18:01] TheNotABoy: I'm only in Western Europe for some reason.
[18:01] Tasha the Even More Merciless: (dead bodies not being burned)
[18:01] Gail The Merciless: 61 people infected in north Africa.
[18:01] Gail The Merciless: god, my parasite is slow
[18:02] **cvillette**: *speeds up the clock*
[18:02] TheNotABoy: Ooh, East Europe too.
[18:02] **cvillette**: The parasites are slow
[18:02] TheNotABoy: Yeah, I'm on high speed.
[18:02] **cvillette**: I wish the map changed color when you infected a region
[18:02] **0metotchtli**: it does.
[18:02] **0metotchtli**: Just when people start dropping hard.
[18:02] **cvillette**: I'm not killing anybody yet!
[18:02] TheNotABoy: Ooh, I've got dementia.
[18:02] **cvillette**: I'm still giving them chancres!
[18:03] Tasha the Even More Merciless: Hah, I've hit Canada
[18:03] **0metotchtli**: Noes!
[18:03] **cvillette**: There we go!
[18:03] Tasha the Even More Merciless: (Snapperhead causes dementia)
[18:03] **cvillette**: I just went geometric.
[18:03] **cvillette**: Twenty thousand
[18:03] **cvillette**: Thirty thousand
[18:03] **cvillette**: come on baby give me BRAZIL
[18:04] **cvillette**: YES!
[18:04] **0metotchtli**: I think I need some cysts here.
[18:04] **cvillette**: South America is MINE
[18:04] TheNotABoy: Whoa, I just killed 1550 people while I wasn't looking.
[18:04] **cvillette**: Argentina. Brazil. Mexico.
[18:04] Tasha the Even More Merciless: I'm up to 139K a day
[18:04] Gail The Merciless: I am airborne
[18:04] **cvillette**: Aww, Peru is on to me.
[18:05] **cvillette**: They shut down public transit.
[18:05] Gail The Merciless: (but still not killing people)
[18:05] **cvillette**: Too late now baby tooooo laaattteee

nowoooowowowowowo.
[18:05] **0metotchtli**: Goodbye, China.
[18:05] **cvillette**: USA!
[18:05] **0metotchtli**: I hope you enjoyed your Olympics before I killed you all.
[18:05] **cvillette**: Canada!
[18:05] **cvillette**: Russia!
[18:05] **cvillette**: Indonesia closed its borders
[18:05] **0metotchtli**: Indonesia's careful that way.
[18:06] **0metotchtli**: aww, they vaccinated against me. :-(
[18:06] **cvillette**: *gives them fatigue*
[18:07] TheNotABoy: *inflicts depression*
[18:07] TheNotABoy: I'm the emo parasite.
[18:07] **cvillette**: Oh, Mexico is actually hauling out a decent disaster response.
[18:07] TheNotABoy: Okay, now the gloves are off.
[18:07] Tasha the Even More Merciless: I seem to have killed 10 million
[18:08] **cvillette**: North Africa just shut down the hospitals.
[18:08] **cvillette**: Take that, baby.
[18:08] TheNotABoy: Ooh, Earthquake in USA>
[18:08] **cvillette**: Mexico closed the airports. Too late...
[18:08] **0metotchtli**: I can't infect more people. :-(
[18:08] **0metotchtli**: That's it, I'm just gonna kill 'em all now.
[18:08] **cvillette**: They're working on a vaccine...
[18:09] TheNotABoy: Mine too.
[18:09] TheNotABoy: Guess the insanity did it.
[18:09] **0metotchtli**: I'm sure the 65 healthy people left in China and the 50 in Russia can have a good time together shoveling bodies.
[18:10] Gail The Merciless: *works slowly and stealthily with only fatigue symptoms*
[18:11] **cvillette**: Russia closed its borders, the rats
[18:11] Gail The Merciless: we aren't getting more symptoms until we've got at least three regions infected.
[18:11] Gail The Merciless: (so slow)
[18:11] **cvillette**: Martial law all over the American supercontinent!
[18:11] Tasha the Even More Merciless: noooooo! mah bacteria, they be

trying to kill it
[18:12] **cvillette**: Canada has shut down the hospitals.
[18:12] **cvillette**: WIN!
[18:12] TheNotABoy: My disease seems limited to Eurasia.
[18:12] TheNotABoy: But it's kicking them in the nads.
[18:13] **0metotchtli**: Mine is all stuck on Asia/Europe.
[18:13] **0metotchtli**: Which is going to be gone when I'm done.
[18:13] **cvillette**: They've got a vaccine.
[18:13] **cvillette**: But that's okay
[18:13] Tasha the Even More Merciless: mine do too
[18:13] Tasha the Even More Merciless: A little too late for Japan.
[18:14] Tasha the Even More Merciless: and the 7500 people still healthy there.
[18:14] **cvillette**: Now we're just waiting on the pulmonary edema
[18:14] TheNotABoy: Durr, vaccine deployed.
[18:15] Gail The Merciless: soon we go waterborne
[18:15] TheNotABoy: It was a great success. :-(
[18:15] **0metotchtli**: aw.
[18:15] **cvillette**: The only clean regions are parts of Asia and the Pacific nations, excepting China and Japan
[18:15] Gail The Merciless: and waterborne!
[18:15] Tasha the Even More Merciless: Oh, poor Canada, with your 22K surviving
[18:15] **0metotchtli**: I think I need to go parasite next time.
[18:15] **0metotchtli**: It is sad to see Maplesyrupitis stopped from worldwide destruction.
[18:16] Tasha the Even More Merciless: Bacteria worked well, but I got over excited too early
[18:16] **cvillette**: Pulmonary edema is ours.
[18:16] Gail The Merciless: first resistance. then virulence.
[18:16] Gail The Merciless: slow and sneaky, that's the plan
[18:16] **0metotchtli**: Yup, I think it's time for take two.
[18:16] **cvillette**: Yep. That worked well for me
[18:17] **0metotchtli**: Poutineitis will now debut.
[18:17] Gail The Merciless: one of these 4000 infected have to travel somewhere other than north Africa soon.

[18:17] TheNotABoy: Europe and Russia have maybe 100 000 healthy people, but until I evolve enough to get more resistance, that's that.
[18:17] **cvillette**: *Buys dementia*
[18:18] **cvillette**: Hah! They're burning bodies in the streets of Belgrade now.
[18:18] **cvillette**: Now we kill.
[18:18] **0metotchtli**: hee
[18:18] **cvillette**: Beautiful, beautiful pulmonary edema
[18:18] Gail The Merciless: 7000 infected, still no deaths
[18:19] Gail The Merciless: *plots the infection of many more*
[18:19] TheNotABoy: I did take out almost 1 billion, but now they've cured me....
[18:19] TheNotABoy: *gives them sores just because*
[18:20] **0metotchtli**: I am terrifically vengeful when they cure me.
[18:20] **0metotchtli**: *is now lying low in North Africa*
[18:20] Gail The Merciless: Now we have the chance to infect water facilities!
[18:20] Gail The Merciless: *rubs hands with glee*
[18:20] Tasha the Even More Merciless: Curse them, they have wiped me out!
[18:21] Tasha the Even More Merciless: *Starts over again*
[18:21] **cvillette**: You have no therapy, monkeys
[18:21] **cvillette**: You have no therapy against me.
[18:21] **0metotchtli**: hee
[18:21] Gail The Merciless: *averaging 300 infections a day*
[18:21] **cvillette**: *waits for tier three*
[18:21] TheNotABoy: This will be close -- will I kill off all my infecteds before I can get resistance 4?
[18:21] Gail The Merciless: 12000 people infected, and still stuck in North Africa.
[18:22] Gail The Merciless: should've gone with somewhere with better transport links
[18:23] **0metotchtli**: hee.
[18:24] TheNotABoy: *buys resistance 4*
[18:24] TheNotABoy: Let's see if this helps.
[18:24] **cvillette**: Yeah, If I hadn't been stuck in Peru, I would have wiped out

everyone
[18:24] **0metotchtli**: Poutineitis may have that issue.
[18:24] **0metotchtli**: North Africa is not hugely touristy.
[18:25] Gail The Merciless: next time, we start with Europe.
[18:25] TheNotABoy: Hmm, looks like resistance is useless once they have a vaccine.
[18:25] TheNotABoy: *makes the last 26 folks sweaty*
[18:26] **cvillette**: Oh, I got ataxia
[18:26] Tasha the Even More Merciless: (I must have hit a daycare, my numbers just doubled)
[18:26] TheNotABoy: Let's try the realistic one now...
[18:26] **cvillette**: Just a few more points to hemorrhagic fever.
[18:26] **0metotchtli**: Okay, some cysts are doing the trick...
[18:27] Tasha the Even More Merciless: oh, for the love of god, get on a plane!
[18:27] Gail The Merciless: 98K infected, and I have South Africa!
[18:27] TheNotABoy: New Zealand?
[18:27] TheNotABoy: Ufkc!
[18:27] TheNotABoy: Why not put me in Antarctica.
[18:27] **cvillette**: Hey, it's better than Peru.
[18:27] **cvillette**: It has an AIRPORT
[18:28] **0metotchtli**: LOL
[18:28] **cvillette**: *waits for the hemorrhaging*
[18:28] Tasha the Even More Merciless: zoonotic! take that!
[18:28] **0metotchtli**: Will one of you nice North Africans please go to the US for specialist cyst treatment?
[18:29] **0metotchtli**: And spurt on a nurse or something?
[18:29] Gail The Merciless: okay, I have gone geometric :-)
[18:29] Tasha the Even More Merciless: bah, none of my 700000 people will get on a plane, why would yours
[18:29] Gail The Merciless: the infections are in the millions now.
[18:30] **0metotchtli**: yeah, I have 10k infected and everyone's just chillin'.
[18:30] **0metotchtli**: Hah! South Africa!
[18:30] **0metotchtli**: That's what you get for decades of apartheid!
[18:30] **cvillette**: They're going to die off before I get my bleeding orifices.
[18:30] Gail The Merciless: bastards.

[18:31] Gail The Merciless: North Africa just copped
[18:31] Gail The Merciless: and Canada shut its shipyards.
[18:31] Gail The Merciless: ah, they're all closing down
[18:32] Gail The Merciless: And I haven't even killed anyone yet!
[18:32] Tasha the Even More Merciless: Only Argentina and Madagascar are holding out on me now
[18:32] **cvillette**: Aww, there's only 134,000 infected left.
[18:33] **0metotchtli**: Nice, Middle East and Mexico.
[18:33] **cvillette**: I did manage to wipe out two thirds of the world's population, though
[18:33] Tasha the Even More Merciless: okay, you can close your borders all you want, I'm global.
[18:33] Tasha the Even More Merciless: now, to start killing people.
[18:34] Gail The Merciless: hah!
[18:34] Gail The Merciless: got you Mexico, Greenland, and Canada!
[18:34] **cvillette**: Allright, hemorrhagic fever. Here we go.
[18:34] **0metotchtli**: hah! Japan.
[18:34] TheNotABoy: Woo Brazil!
[18:35] **0metotchtli**: Dammit, China's closed its airports.
[18:35] **0metotchtli**: I'm being had. :/
[18:35] **cvillette**: I'm just about to lose.
[18:35] **cvillette**: 2933 still infected
[18:35] Gail The Merciless: still haven't killed anyone
[18:35] **0metotchtli**: *goes waterborne*
[18:35] Gail The Merciless: got you, Indonesia!
[18:36] TheNotABoy: *infects over half of NZ*
[18:36] **0metotchtli**: Oh, I got India and Europe.
[18:37] **0metotchtli**: Hah!
[18:37] **0metotchtli**: China, it did not save you!
[18:37] Gail The Merciless: I am not at all lethal
[18:37] **0metotchtli**: Yeah, me neither.
[18:37] **0metotchtli**: Yet.
[18:37] Gail The Merciless: bah.
[18:37] Gail The Merciless: they are developing a vaccine
[18:37] **0metotchtli**: And the US.
[18:37] Gail The Merciless: I need to get lethal soon

[18:37] **0metotchtli**: I think Poutineitis may take the day here.
[18:39] Gail The Merciless: I need to give them vomiting soon
[18:40] Gail The Merciless: My first dead victim!
[18:40] Tasha the Even More Merciless: and pulmonary edema is a go.
[18:40] Gail The Merciless: and now we have 41 million dead!
[18:40] Gail The Merciless: *cackles*
[18:40] Tasha the Even More Merciless: 1 country still with hospitals
[18:41] Gail The Merciless: 12 hospitals left
[18:41] Gail The Merciless: no, 10
[18:41] TheNotABoy: Hee! 526 days for vaccine!
[18:41] Gail The Merciless: die, world, die!
[18:41] Tasha the Even More Merciless: only 46 million left uninfected in the world
[18:42] Tasha the Even More Merciless: And I think that New Zealand is about to be forsaken
[18:42] **0metotchtli**: aw fuck, they're on the vaccine.
[18:43] **cvillette**: There. Got two thirds of the population that time. Next one, I mean to win.

- Current Mood: genocidal
- Current Music:Mythbusters

September 9th, 2008

[private] Hey, magic.

- Sep. 9th, 2008 at 2:11 PM

16) Apparently, preserved ginger works on conditioned nausea just as well as it does *real* nausea. And it's 85 calories of carbs an ounce!

Score. I wonder if they sell stock.

- Current Mood: grateful

- Current Music:Stew - Bijou

Tags:

- gratitude

September 10th, 2008

[private] I need an academic advisor to point the way.

- Sep. 10th, 2008 at 9:07 PM

You know, this whole terminally single thing was so much easier when I didn't know anybody who had a relationship I'd touch with a ten-foot pole.

Schadenfreude is better than self pity.

God. What am I *doing* with my life?

- Current Mood: tired
- Current Music:Avenue Q - I Wish I Could Go Back to College

Tags:

- pathetic whinging

September 12th, 2008

[private] When the levee breaks

- Sep. 12th, 2008 at 4:42 PM

Sorry, Galveston. Sorry, Houston. Sorry, Corpus Christi.

I see the weather reports and think, *Knock it down. Wash it away. Scour it down to the fucking bedrock.* If not wanting that would save Galveston, would I think differently?

I don't know. That scares me.

Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good

- Current Mood: indescribable

September 13th, 2008

[private] High tide, at a full moon.

- Sep. 13th, 2008 at 8:55 AM

This is why I can't talk to anyone. Because nobody would understand how I feel about this, and they'd be horrified if they knew.

It's one thing to know you're... evil. And quite another to try to find ways to tell the people who believe in you and rely on you.

I built a good life, dammit. I was winning. I had *fixed things*. I salvaged it and grew it and I worked hard to get it and he broke it all. And even killing him wasn't enough to get it back.

I have no idea why I keep getting out of bed in the morning, except something in my head insists I do it. And we all know what that something is, if we're honest, don't we?

Thank God for conservation of energy. I know it's not really my contrivance. You can't herd a hurricane the way you can herd a fire. The fact that I *want*

revenge on the entire state of Texas doesn't mean I'm going to get it.

I can hear him in my head. I know exactly what he'd say. *It's our storm, baby boy. It's God's storm. Isn't it beautiful?*

...I think I missed my window.

- Current Mood: miserable

September 15th, 2008

Sep. 15th, 2008

- 8:49 PM

Tonight, I spent two hours climbing and then downclimbing all the easiest routes at the gym, proving to My Evil Overlord that I am fit to start working on some harder stuff again. Thing I learned: downclimbing is still kind of fun even when the routes are way too easy.

And then, as thanks, she took me back to her place and is making me bake potatoes for her and her spouse, and help them pack.

Platypi get no respect around here.

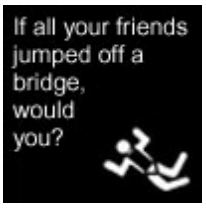
- Current Mood: accomplished
- Current Music:The English Beat - Mirror In The Bathroom

Tags:

- rehab: climbing

All-terrain

- Sep. 15th, 2008 at 8:53 PM



I should totally get these.

September 17th, 2008

to Harpy and Wabbit

- Sep. 17th, 2008 at 4:13 PM

Okay, guys, I'm going in. If I explode, remember, I love you. Have earplugs. Hope it's boring so you won't be jealous.

- Current Location:9:30 Club
- Current Mood: determined
- Current Music:Fuck Buttons and Mogwai, soon

! !!! !

- Sep. 17th, 2008 at 10:01 PM

Yeah, it was boring. Good thing you couldn't go.

...

...I *lie*.

Okay, imagine you've got this GREAT idea for a high school science fair project that examines the correlation of decibel level and rhythmic and melodic repetition to listeners' attraction to sound and their perception of it as music. But you're pretty sure if you actually demonstrate that project, you will totally get suspended for a week. Do you do it anyway?

If you answered "Yes," congratulations, you may already be in Fuck Buttons.

Two geeky guys, one long folding table, a bunch of more-or-less unidentifiable stuff (okay, there was a floor tom, and I think that might have been a baby monitor, maybe, and probably a keyboard, and a suitcase that one of the guys kept putting his hand in, possibly). Beats, long chords, series of notes. Scary noises repeated in patterns so they stopped being scary and became music. Unbefuckinglievably loud.

And the two guys hunch over their junk at opposite ends of the table, watching each other, waiting for some invisible cue, like they're playing a two-person video game and are waiting for the light to blink for "Go." Great to watch. They made me think about the nature of music. Not least because, when they were done, they just stopped. Wham. Silence. Which made me think about the nature of noise.

And a good thing, too, because you want to know where you stand on that when Mogwai starts playing.

This is the loudest band I've ever heard. They may be the loudest *thing* I've ever heard, and I've heard a handgun fired indoors. They're so loud, by the end of the first song, I was having a full-on adrenaline reaction, complete with tunnel vision. Yes, a band that goes straight to your endocrine system. It's like standing on the runway with a DC-10 taking off right overhead.

But if Saturn V rockets sang like whales, this would be what they sounded like. Because it was incredibly musical. It was moody and dramatic and full of dynamic tension. Symphonic, if symphony orchestras could make your entire ribcage vibrate with the bass line.

Five-piece band, with a drum kit, electric bass, keyboards, guitars. (It's probably a good thing they don't use electric violin, because at that volume, one could probably vibrate the nails out of the building framing and knock the whole place down.) Awesome musicianship--the drummer and the keyboard player stood out especially for me, but they were all amazing. And tight--the band have to be paying attention all the time, to catch the dynamics and the big amazing crashes of sound, and they never put a finger wrong.

You don't dance to Mogwai. You stand there and let your molecules do it for you.

This show brought the awesome in Mothership-sized quantities.

I'll be at work tomorrow, but I may not be, you know, fully functional.

(**carpe_noir**, that comment was, James is already sold out, and so are both Old Crow Medicine Show nights. Rats! But I owe you big for recommending tonight, man.)

- Current Mood: drained
- Current Music:the ringing in my ears

September 18th, 2008

"Find out what you do and then do it for all you're worth."

- Sep. 18th, 2008 at 3:13 PM

A sample of my afternoon:

Our Hero: *is lying face-down on a padded table in his skivvies while a

smoking hot massage therapist who is not quite twice his age brutalizes him in unsexy ways*
Smoking Hot Massage Therapist Who's Not Quite Twice My Age: Okay, roll over now.
OH: I bet you say that to all the boys.
SHMTWNQTMA: Actually, yes. Here, let me lift the sheet. How're the thighs?
OH: *shamefaced* Sore. I've been climbing. And sparring.
SHMTWNQTMA: We'll work on those, then. Are you still using the wrist brace?
OH: For everything more strenuous than lifting my coffee cup. Hey, that tickles.
SHMTWNQTMA: You're not usually ticklish.
OH: *squirming* *I know.* I'm all defendy today. Sorry.
SHMTWNQTMA: Sometimes people get defensive or ticklish when muscle groups are tight. Try not to kick me in the face, okay?
OH: I'll talk! I'll tell you anything!
SHMTWNQTMA: *laughing too hard to continue*
OH: *wins*
SHMTWNQTMA: Just for that, I'm giving you more stretching exercises.
OH: ...

Here, have some Mogwai:

https://youtu.be/1tuGrEynG68

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been privated. Based on Internet Archive data, and context clues, the song was Travel is Dangerous, by Mogwai: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLTxA-1JI3M]

- Current Mood: accomplished
- Current Music:Mogwai - Travel Is Dangerous

September 21st, 2008

Sear-iously good

- Sep. 21st, 2008 at 12:29 PM

trollcatz, if I'd thought of it yesterday, I might have guided you through Brother Alton's salt-crust beef tenderloin recipe instead. Because it's so damned impressive.

But the pot roast is easier, and classic winter comfort food. And also om-nom-nom. Do not leave out the raisins and the olives, man.

And by the time T. gets tired of us winching her limbs to the furniture, it'll be a good moment to put the vegetables in to roast.

- Current Mood: hungry
- Current Music:Garbage - Queer

Tags:

- food is love,
- recipes: not mine

September 24th, 2008

People should only have birthdays on weekends.

- Sep. 24th, 2008 at 9:35 AM

So, Wabbit, how about we celebrate twice?

Saturday

And on the day itself we can go cut a, um, floor?

- Current Mood: busy
- Current Music:Marseille Figs - Good Year

September 28th, 2008

[private] Pretty well, considering

- Sep. 28th, 2008 at 7:38 AM

At a thrill show, not only are you in the dark, but you can be pretty sure nobody's looking at you. Also, I kept telling myself, "This was your idea, idiot."

It was good to know I could stick it through the knife bits and the escape, actually. I'm pretty sure that's an improvement. Though this morning I'm wiped out. Come on, cowboy, time to head for the laundry and the grocery store. Life's a'waitin'.

- Current Mood: gak.

Tags:

- gratitude,
- the new normal

shadow unit

2.03 "The Sin Eater" - by Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

Avon, Wisconsin, October 2008

When Ingrid Lessing pushed through the glass doors of Kolb Hall, she heard laughter in the Campus Security dispatcher's office. A little too loud, a little strained. But still. *Good for them.*

She leaned on the hall counter and stuck her head in the open service window. "Hey, no fun on duty!"

Barb Shipton grinned over one sloping shoulder, showing the teeth of a lifetime smoker. "Day shift was over five minutes ago, boss. You got nothin' on me."

She was right. The new kid, DuKayne, was ready to take over the dispatcher's desk for second shift. He came loaded with class work, as usual: physics, this evening. "Sorry, Ms. Lessing--"

"Your leg," Ingrid said. "I am pulling it."

He laughed, but carefully. Ingrid reviewed the duty rosters in her head, recalling who'd been working when the worst of the shit hit the ventilators. Not DuKayne.

But he'd have heard it all. The security guards hung out in dispatch and gossiped between rounds, and Ingrid wasn't stupid enough to tell them to stop. This was their squad room and break room, and knowledge might not be better than body armor, but it helped you figure out when to duck. The dispatchers knew everything.

And the second and third shift dispatchers were all students. Which meant the student population of Sullivan College knew everything, too. *If only the*

information flowed in both directions, Ingrid thought for the umpty-thousandth time.

DuKayne took the desk chair, and Barb tugged her purse out of the file cabinet and checked for her car keys.

Ingrid heard heavy steps coming down the hall on the other side of the office just before Joe Womerik filled the doorway. He pushed his black-framed glasses against the bridge of his nose with his index finger, an unconscious salute. "South campus checked. Admin building and the Chapel are secured," he said in his big, slow voice. "Art Center front door's unlocked, though. Some kind of show tonight. Hey, hi, boss."

"Hi, JoWo. Thanks. Who else is on?" She knew, but it was chat, and it was a good way to find out if everything was running smoothly without coming out and asking it.

"Sheila's getting trained on the residence halls. Tim came in early to show her where to click in."

Sheila's voice crackled on the outdated dispatch radio. "Unit three to base. Ten-thirty...shit, ten-thirty-three. My twenty-- I'm at Bacon Hall. Jumper. She's going to jump."

Ingrid had the mic in her hand; she didn't remember reaching through the window to grab it. "Unit three, this is base. Backup on the way. Where are you?"

(Crackle.) "Bacon. Bacon, the quad side. Tim--" (Crackle.)

Ingrid grabbed a walkie from the charging station. "DuKayne, nine-one-one. Tell 'em it's Sullivan campus security, give 'em our code, and tell them we need fire department ladder truck and the ambo. Right now."

She hit the front doors and the cool evening air running. JoWo's big cop boots pounded behind her.

Thirty or so students already formed a ragged arc on the sidewalk and lawn in front of Bacon Hall. As Ingrid pelted into hearing range, Sheila was saying, "--back, please. Keep the area clear for emergency vehicles." *Good girl. Thank God for smart new hires.*

The sun was going down on the other side of the river. The sky was stained-glass blue, and the clouds were like peach slices, gold shading to rose. Against that backdrop the figure on the roof of the four-story dorm was a black paper cutout, faceless, genderless.

When Sheila caught sight of Ingrid, the relief on her face broke Ingrid's heart.

"Good work," Ingrid told her. "Keep them back. Draft a few to help you." She had time now to look at the students' faces. The tall, big-nosed kid who managed the coffee house. The girl who taught folk dancing. One of the late-night guys at the campus radio station. "You, you, you. Help Officer Pennicuik keep people away from the building." She turned back to Sheila. "Where's Tim?"

"He went up there."

"Who is it?"

Sheila shook her head. "I don't know. Shit. I don't know her."

"Gildersen," Tim Miner's voice answered, and there was Tim, rock-steady, pink-faced and panting. His dead-leaf-colored hair stuck to his forehead in little arrows. "Cat Gildersen. The dispatcher." The last word split on the way out over a gasp of air.

Second shift Fridays. Cat had smiled shyly and said she didn't mind missing Friday night events; she was a music major, she spent so much time in the practice rooms that she needed to work dispatch to keep up on her academics. "And I'm not a party type, I guess," Cat had confessed with a self-effacing grimace. She was nervous on the desk, but she always followed procedure. *One of ours*.

You still think like a cop. But Ingrid hired the dispatchers. That made them hers.

"She's blocked the roof doors somehow," Tim said. "By the time we got a ram up there--"

"Did you talk to her?"

He shook his head. "I called. Nothing."

"Give me your passkey just in case. I'm going to try to flag her from a fourth-floor window."

Tim yanked it off his ring and handed it over. "Fire department--"

"Called. I want to keep her busy." Which they both knew meant, *I want her not to panic and swan-dive at the sight of the truck.* "JoWo, you're with me."

The kids in the dorm had figured out something was wrong. They didn't know what to do about it yet, so they were milling in the halls and stairwells. Two security uniforms, and JoWo's size, did some road-clearing. "Go to your rooms, please, and stay there," Ingrid repeated on each landing as she pushed up the stairwell. "You're in no danger. But we need the exits clear."

She hoped they needed the exits clear. She hoped Cat didn't make her own way down.

The new dorms had lounges on each floor, but Bacon dated to the 1920s, when lounging happened on the first floor under the housemother's eye. Ingrid banged on the door of 410, halfway down the hall on the quad side.

The door opened a foot, and a wide-eyed blond boy stared out at her.

"I don't care what you're doing or what you're growing, and I'm not going to look. I need your window. This is life or death."

She must have sounded as if she meant it. The kid held the door open.

The window screen was missing; thank God for the oversights of the housing office. But the frame was old, with eighty years of paint on it. It opened six inches and jammed, yanked her tendons and sent pain like the smack of a hammer through her weak right shoulder. "JoWo--" she gasped.

He bumped her aside, planted his feet wide, and heaved. Paint and wood screeched and shed flakes onto the linoleum.

Ingrid grabbed the frame before JoWo let go and slid out head-first and belly-up, until she was half outside the building. JoWo gripped her belt; it felt solid as a rescue harness. "Cat! Cat, it's Ingrid! Please, will you talk to me?"

She couldn't see at first, after the dim stairwell, against the dazzle of the sky. Then Cat moved. She was kneeling on the white-painted roof cornice, looking, not down, but across the quad. Ingrid couldn't see her expression.

"Cat, please step back from the edge. It's not really safe." Calm, friendly, authoritative. *And I'm hanging practically upside down by my belt from a fourth-floor window. Guess I'm a natural.*

"Ingrid?" Cat sounded calm, too, and a little surprised.

"Yep. Cat, unblock the door up there. I'll come to you. We can talk."

"No. I have to do this."

Ingrid heard sirens down the hill. Where the hell had they been? The town wasn't that big. "No, no, you don't. Whatever the trouble is, we can find another way to fix it."

Cat shook her head; her unbound hair flailed around her face like a snapped ash-blonde towel. "It's me, Ingrid. It's my fault. The chem lab fire, the guy with the knife, the vandalism, the thefts--" Her high, wobbly voice was stronger than Ingrid had ever heard it.

Ingrid's abdominal muscles burned with the strain, pulling against gravity, maintaining the half-crunch that kept Cat in sight. "You didn't do those things, Cat. You can't have. The knifing in the dining hall--you were on the desk when it happened."

"It's a curse," said Cat, steady as stone.

Cat had once told her, wry-mouthed, "To my family, Missouri Synod Lutherans are wild-eyed liberals." They wanted her to go to Bible college, get a teaching certificate, get married. Not get a scholarship to a private liberal-arts college that Ingrid's old guidance counsellor would have called a "freak-flag school." "There's no such thing," Ingrid said, short of breath.

"I'm sorry, Ingrid. When I'm gone it'll stop. It'll just get worse if I don't." And Cat unfolded to stand on the cornice.

"Cat, no. It's all right. You haven't done anything. Cat--"

It was a graceful motion. Not a dive, not a jump. Just an effortless leaning forward into the arms of gravity. Ingrid flung out a hand--instinct, it wouldn't help--and heard JoWo grunt when momentum tugged her further out the window. Below her people shouted, screamed, but they weren't as real as the black silhouette, T-shaped, printed against the sky, printed on her vision long after it fell out of sight.

JoWo hauled her in the window, helped her through the room and out into the empty hall. The residents must have all gone to watch. Had the blond kid gone, too, or was he still standing inside the door of his room, wondering what had just happened? It was true, what Ingrid had told him. He could have been running a casino in there. She hadn't seen a thing.

The paramedics were working when she got outside, looking for signs of life. But they had the bag ready, and anyone could tell they were going to have to use it.

The students had drawn back and broken into clusters, sharing horror, comfort, disbelief, anger. Fear. Of course, fear. Because they must be asking each other, What next? What new, rotten event was preparing to show up uninvited on the campus calendar?

Sheila stood sentinel over nothing, her face wet with tears. *She'll quit, even odds. I don't blame her.* Tim moved slowly through the bystanders, touching base. The students liked him; they knew he was honest and fair, calm in the heart of their storms, flexible unless pushed. He'd be good with them now, letting them know authority was there to hold back the chaos and put broken things right.

It was the lie she lived by. Thank God Tim was there to tell it; she didn't think she could, right now.

Twilight crept up. The lamps came on around the edges of the quad. Three men from Buildings and Grounds roped off the sidewalk and began to scrub at the stain, overlaying the smell of the grass they'd mowed in the afternoon with disinfectant. The Dean of Student Life called, and JoWo went to open the chapel he'd made sure was locked earlier, so students could gather, share memories, be told by the administration that There Was No Tragedy Like the Loss of a Young Life.

Ingrid sat behind her desk in the office next door to the dispatcher's, trying not to admit she was waiting for the next phone call, the next radio call, the next shout or scream or crash.

There was no such thing as a curse.

Tim knocked on the frame of her open door. The hall's overhead lights picked up the shoulders of his blue uniform shirt and the comb-furrows in his tidied hair. "You okay?"

She realized her office was dark, and her face burned with tears. "Not even a little."

Tim slid around the corner of the door and lowered himself cautiously into one of the plastic chairs, the ones that made her keep staff meetings short because she hated to make anyone sit in them longer than necessary. Tim moved like a bigger man than he was. He wasn't as tall as Ingrid, and except for the breadth of his shoulders, he wasn't particularly wide. Ingrid thought the way he carried himself was part of why he was effective in security. She'd never heard him raise his voice.

"You couldn't have stopped her," Tim said. A straightforward comment, without sympathy. After all, why did Ingrid need sympathy? It wasn't as if she'd known the deceased well.

Obviously, she hadn't known her at all.

"There must have been... She wasn't happy. She told me she got e-mail saying she'd burn in hell. She thought it was probably from her sister, but what kind of family would do that?"

Tim shook his head. "Wasn't she seeing some guy?"

"Broke up with her. He didn't say why, the bastard." The boyfriend should have been there for her. But then, that was also true of Cat's boss. "I knew she wasn't happy. I should have seen it."

Tim cupped his short-fingered square hands over his knees and pushed his head forward, as if he wanted to see her expression in the uneven light from the hall. "You couldn't've known she'd *kill* herself."

Nobody could have. Even someone who'd understood Cat, who saw she was nervous and sensitive, even the person who'd sent her e-mail, couldn't have known.

But they might have been hoping.

*

Nikki Lau arrived at the airport departure lounge, briefcase handbag on her shoulder and carry-on skittering behind, to find she wasn't the first team member there. Daniel Brady stood silhouetted against the pearl-gray morning light through the windows. Lau didn't need details; she knew him

by his shoulders, his straight spine, his easy assumption of parade rest. He looked as if he could stand that way for hours.

She walked up behind him. "Hey."

He started, which surprised her. He blinked away whatever he was thinking, and scraped both hands through his polished blond hair. "Hey, you. Damn, I figured at this hour we'd be holding the plane for you."

"You know me. Born ready."

"Yeah." He tipped his head toward his left shoulder. "I do know you."

Oh, so well. "I woke up at three and couldn't drop off again."

He flashed his wide, white smile down at her. "See, here I was, thinking you'd been kidnapped by pod people. Anything I can help with?"

Lau thought about it. "Got a cure for the dark-before-the-dawn 'Ohmygod what am I doing with my life' heebie-jeebies?"

"If I did, I'd get rich and work for fun. Any specific jeebie you want to mention?"

"Just the cloud of gnat-like doubt." Sometimes it was as if her family, in their least-sensitive and enlightened incarnation, sat on her shoulder and breathed expectations in her ear. *This work of yours, this career--what will you have when you're old? What are you giving to the future?*

Fewer bad guys, she'd tell the phantom voices. Fewer gammas. That ought to be plenty.

"Any sign of Chaz?" Brady asked.

"He'll be here." It came out of her mouth prickly. She hadn't meant that.

Brady seemed unruffled. "I know he will. Just asking if you saw him on the way in."

Lau walked to a row of seats by the window, dropped her shoulder bag in one, and plopped down next to it. Brady followed her; the chair groaned under his muscle and bone when he sat.

"We can't take care of him," Lau said at last. "He'll be furious if we do."

Brady nodded. "And we can't not take care of him. A cop comes back to active duty after being hurt that bad--he can't know if he can do the job. Sometimes he can't. If there isn't somebody there to back him up..."

"Hey, watch your manly pronouns, there."

That made Brady grin. "Yeah, 'cause it's not like girls are tough."

Lau punched him in the biceps, and he clutched his arm and sagged in his seat, groaning. "Okay, seriously. You know Reyes is going to be watching him like a freakin' review board, but he's not going to show anything to Reyes. If Chaz needs an assist, it'll be up to us to spot it."

"And provide it in a way he can pretend not to notice."

"Exactly."

Brady nodded. They sat a moment in the easy silence that Lau treasured. She'd spent too much time explaining herself to people--"Smart, pretty girl like you? You want to do *what*?" But Brady *got* her. She hoped like hell she did the same for him, or anything else half as valuable.

He said, "I think I'm seeing somebody."

She'd begun to wonder if he was going to tell her. She'd figured it out--among other things, Brady wasn't usually a stare-into-space guy--but figuring it out wasn't the same as direct from the source. She pivoted her head slowly, like an owl, and raised her eyebrows. "You think? Usually you notice that sort of thing."

"Yeah, well." Brady straightened a pocket flap on his suit coat. "He's ashamed."

She wasn't sure which seemed more impossible: that anyone could be that clueless, or that Brady would put up with it. "Danny... You can do better than somebody who's ashamed of you."

"It's not me he's ashamed of." His blue eyes looked straight down into hers, and his expression was all stoicism and calm and yet, unmistakably, sad.

He stared down the length of the terminal, and his voice was matter-of-fact when he added, "He works for State. You know what they're like."

The State Department represented the U.S. to the rest of the globe. They had an image to sell. *God damn the fucked-upness of the world*. But she growled, "Jesus on a trampoline!" which made him laugh, and which made it unnecessary to admit that neither of them could fix the world by themselves. "What's his name?"

The infinitesimal pause before he answered put her on alert. "Gray. Grayson."

Lau eyed him narrowly. "*Grayson*? Where does that come from?"

Brady sighed like a resigned Great Dane. "He's a Yankee."

She managed to pat his arm and cough out, "Oh, sweetie," before the giggling crippled her.

*

Brady watched Chaz bridge the cards on the fold-out table between them. There wouldn't be time to do more than shuffle and deal before the plane reached cruising altitude. When that happened, Reyes was going to pop out of his seat and start the briefing they hadn't had before they left. But sometimes you needed to do something with your hands, to pretend you didn't need anything at all. When you did, your friends shouldn't call you on it.

Maybe it was Chaz's way of pushing reset, of establishing a baseline for normal at the start of the job. Maybe he shared Brady's twitchiness over the cases that got them out of bed and onto the plane without passing the "go" of the briefing room.

Brady liked the ritual of gathering as a team, crowded into that damned tiny room. When they didn't do it, he missed the sharing of ideas and the chance to listen to the human engine running. If one of the cylinders was misfiring, he wanted to know before they got out in the field.

He slipped a look at Lau across the aisle. She was watching Chaz's hands, too, but she must have got the someone's-looking feeling; her eyes cut to Brady's, and her eyebrows gave a twitch.

If Worth or Hafidha were here, they could fuss over Chaz. They were the only ones he'd take it from. Falkner didn't fuss; she gave orders, and Chaz followed them. But Falkner was back in D.C., as well. In theory, Brady

could give orders (*Supervisory* Special Agent), but Chaz only followed Brady's orders if he agreed with them.

Brady had no idea if Reyes was likely to order Chaz to take care of himself, or if Chaz would obey.

Chaz's fingers didn't falter, but Brady could tell he was compensating for stiffness in his right wrist, and the tightness in his shoulders. Pain was a hell of a teacher, especially of unconscious behavior.

Three months out of the hospital, and he was still too damned skinny, even for Chaz. The skin around his two-colored eyes managed to be sunken and puffy at once, and faintly bruised-looking. Not eating or sleeping well. Hell, it would be a surprise if he were.

Hunching his shoulders also hiked Chaz's arms further into his sleeves, so the hems were sure to cover his wrists. And if Brady wasn't used to watching him fiddle with it, he might not have noticed there was no gadgety wristwatch on his arm.

Brady could see it all without seeming to look; it was a professional skill. It helped that Chaz didn't want to know they were looking.

Brady wondered about the reflex that made Chaz cover up. It had to be reflex, not reason, because he only had to look in the mirror to realize *anyone* would know he wasn't all right. Lau was on the money: in this production, Chaz was playing Mr. I'm Fine.

The seatbelt light cut off, and Reyes swept up the papers on the table before him and stood. *Way to call it, Mr. Profiler.* He swung down the aisle and settled into the seat across from Lau, so the four of them made a square with the aisle down the middle.

He could have sat there when we boarded. Except Reyes wouldn't prep in front of them. It would remind his team he wasn't born knowing everything. Brady wanted to catch Lau's eye, or Chaz's. Instead he fixed his gaze on Reyes like a good soldier. Chaz gathered the cards and poked them in their box.

Reyes handed out photos, copies of police reports and newspaper articles. "Sullivan College in Avon, Wisconsin. Private four-year liberal arts college, one of an association of well-regarded schools in the Midwest. It's rated one

of the best small colleges in the country. One thousand, two hundred students, about fifty percent from the Midwest, thirty from states east of Ohio, a significant minority from California and the Pacific Northwest, and twenty-four students from outside the U.S. One hundred seventy-three faculty members, and all the usual administrative and support staff."

From the photos, it was a nice place. The buildings were a mix of modern, fake-Federal, and 19th century neo-Gothic, but the red brick gave them a family resemblance. It looked as if the founders hoped to remind prospective students of Boston. The campus map showed the academic and administration buildings at one end of the campus and the dorms, dining hall, and student services at the other, separated by a street. Except for that stretch of pavement, the campus touched the rest of Avon only around its outer edges.

"So who did what to whom?" Lau asked, pushing the photos aside to look at the first police report.

Reyes fiddled his own papers before he answered. *Uh-oh*, Brady thought, and saw the same thought cross Chaz's face, and Lau's.

"Sullivan has experienced a series--an escalating series--of disturbances since the beginning of the fall term."

"Disturbances," Brady repeated.

"Malicious rumors, slander, cruel hoaxes, vandalism, petty theft, fights, arson, assault, and now, suicide."

"Wait." It was the first thing Chaz had said since he'd pulled out the cards. "When did the term start?" He scrabbled through the records. "September second? That whole list in a month?"

Reyes pressed his lips flat and nodded.

"You wouldn't get that much mayhem in a month at a school the size of UCLA," Lau said. "Okay, maybe UCLA. But twelve hundred students?"

"Sounds like they have a problem," Brady agreed. "But why do we think they have *our* kind of problem?"

Lau scowled down at a sheaf of photocopied newspaper article and drummed her pen against her lower lip. "I don't see anything to activate the

Houdini Clause. Sure, it's not likely that a single person would make so much trouble in so many ways over so little time, but it's not actually impossible." She looked abruptly up at Reyes. "For that matter, how did this get to the BAU? No interstate element, no indication of serial crime, no behavioral signatures--"

"Tamara Belker, the Dean of Student Life, is a friend of Victor Celentano."

Brady studied Reyes's half-averted face. "Knowing the chief of the Behavioral Analysis Unit doesn't mean you can call in the Feds when flying shit threatens your enrollment numbers."

"Celentano thought it was worth looking into. I agreed."

"And the field office in Chicago was all out of regular agents?"

Reyes gave Brady the look that said Brady was a pain in Reyes's ass, but since Reyes was a goddamn bodhisattva, he wasn't going to cuss him out. "We can do as good a job of hunting a non-anomalous UNSUB as the average field agent. The reverse isn't true. So in this case, we play it safe."

"It's the escalation, isn't it?" Chaz's voice was rough; he cleared his throat. "That's why we're going, and why we're in a hurry. Because if there's a jammer in this, he might be brand-new. We could learn more about how it starts."

Which explained why Reyes went for it. Brady still wanted to know why Celentano waved it in front of him. Maybe this was a slow ball across the plate after too many ugly cases. Or Celentano was pulling them out of the game until they got their shit together. Or he was testing them. If they insisted on finding a gamma where there was nothing but overwrought college kids, they'd look like tinfoil-hat loonies.

If there was a gamma, and they *couldn't* find him, there'd be bodies. But that was always true.

Lau slid out of her shoes and tucked her feet under her on the gray-upholstered seat. Brady recognized her digging-in pose. "The first police report is for vandalism--paint remover poured on a car hood. Ick. Tires and seats slashed on bikes outside the student union. Ah, then there's a classic: 'fag' spray-painted on the side of another car. Asshole."

"Eviscerated effigy hung from a tree outside the library. Then a--a dog, same thing." Chaz's voice was hollow. "Both female."

"An exhibit of East African art trashed, and 'Niggerland' painted on the walls. Okay, this is nuts." Even as he said it, Brady realized his voice was too loud, his heart rate was up. "The first two incidents might target some specific group--the car and the bikes might belong to gays or women or African-Americans. But who the hell hates *everybody*? There's got to be more than one vandal."

Reyes shook his head. "The rest of the incidents don't conform to standards for hate crimes. Three paintings stolen from a gallery the night before an art major's show. Exam questions stolen from a physics professor's office. All the plants a bio student had started as part of his senior project taken from the greenhouse. In the knife attack in the student dining hall, both attacker and victim were white males." Reyes must have seen Brady's mouth open; he finished, "The fight was about something the victim was alleged to have said he would do to the girlfriend of the attacker."

"Sounds like somebody who knows the campus and has a lot of access."

Chaz made a scornful noise between his lips. "A place that size? Everybody knows the campus."

"And nobody knows how to lock a door?"

"The question of access at least suggests we're looking for someone who lives or works on campus," Reyes said hastily. "Someone from off campus would stand out in a small student and employee population."

Brady tried to catch Chaz's eye across the table. Chaz would appreciate Dad's "don't make me come over there" voice. But Chaz frowned at the photos instead.

"Then there's the suicide." Lau sounded bleak. "Jesus, in the middle of the dorms, in front of witnesses."

Brady felt his insides clench at the thought of it: how it would look, how it would sound. How many college kids had ever seen a dead body, never mind one like that? He hadn't even been there, and it made him a little sick.

He looked from Lau to Reyes, to Chaz, and saw his own anger and horror--Of course. "He wants a reaction," he said aloud. "The bogus hate crimes--he

was pushing buttons. Everything in those police reports would stir up a geographically compact, insulated population of college kids like a stick to a beehive."

Lau's head snapped up, making her black hair sweep the air like wings. "So the point isn't the crimes, it's the chaos? Could be. Might be a clue to his manifestation, or his mythology. Or both."

Reyes spread his hands wide over the documents in front of him, as if he could absorb clues out of the ink through his fingertips. "Don't go into this assuming we're on a bug hunt. If we focus on the anomaly, we could miss the ordinary emerging psycho killer." Reyes might have been perfectly serious. If so, Brady was pretty sure Reyes was the only person alive who could say a sentence like that with a straight face.

"All right," Lau said. "Garden variety or gamma, what does he get out of stirring up the campus?" What does he get out of it?"

Brady leaned his chin on his fists. "If it's not a gamma, it could be a distraction. Cover for something else. Or this is aimed at the college itself--see previous reference to enrollment."

"A gamma often wants the same things a non-anomalous criminal wants," Reyes said. "The difference is method, not motivation."

"Except when it's not." Chaz's eyes were tracking swiftly down the police reports, page after page. He didn't see the look Reyes sent sideways at him. Was it for the comment, Brady wondered, or for the distant way he'd made it? Or neither?

"If the pattern of escalation holds, what comes after suicide?" Lau asked. She knew, of course, but Brady answered anyway.

"Murder."

Act II

Reyes let Brady drive the rented sedan. He wanted to watch as they crossed the unacknowledged lines between factory town, professors' homes, student rentals, and campus property. The lines were there, as always. But Reyes was surprised at how they blurred, and how subtle the neighborhood differences were. An expensive private college in a blue-collar town could

turn itself into an unwalled fortress of privilege. Sullivan College appeared to have worked out something like coexistence.

The pressure generating the college's problems was likely coming from within, then. Judging by appearances, anyway, and sometimes one could.

Reyes was human (whatever others might claim to the contrary), and humans didn't multitask well. Still, he split his attention between the shaded streets with their foursquare houses and the conversation in the back seat.

"UCLA is a city all by itself," Lau said. "The dynamics of a school like this--Maybe it's more like life in a small town."

Reyes waited for Chaz to mention his time at Princeton, a very different city from UCLA and still unlike Sullivan. Or possibly his high school; its enrollment was about what Sullivan's was, but he didn't think he'd ever heard Chaz mention his high school years.

Instead, Chaz said, "Different size, but similar identity groups. Administrators, professors, support personnel, blue-collar jobs. Jocks, tech geeks, artists, Greeks, slackers. Same categories, smaller pool." His flat voice might have been invoked by pushing a button on a museum display.

In Tucson almost a year ago, and in San Diego after Thanksgiving, Reyes had watched Chaz work comfortably, confidently, as an essential piece of the team-puzzle. The *real* Chaz, he'd told himself. Because that's how he'd thought, he'd thought too little; he'd taken Chaz's ease and energy for granted. People returned to their default state. If you knew what it was, you knew what to expect.

Except for nearly twenty years, Chaz had hidden his real self under a series of disguises, surviving in potentially hostile territory. Reyes had assumed Chaz was free now. He'd forgotten Chaz might not agree. And Reyes was among the people least likely to be able to convince Chaz otherwise.

He could try. He could crane his neck to look around the headrest and say something about Chaz's experience with Ivy League kids and how it might translate to this campus. Anything to say he knew Chaz was himself, singular, valuable.

Brady turned the sedan into a parking area marked with a blue-and-gold sign reading "Visitors," and announced, "You are here."

Chaz slid stiffly out the rear passenger-side door, and the moment was gone.

Another blue-and-gold sign suggested that the Administration building was thataway. They'd all seen photos of the red brick, the white columns and cupola; they didn't need the tip. Still, the reality of it struck Reyes, the almost pastoral quality of the green lawns and old buildings. A landscape on which to raise scholars. Surrounded by the illusion of peace, he felt anxiety nibbling the edge of his awareness.

Brady dropped back as they climbed the steps to the entrance, until he was at Reyes's shoulder. "I'm pretty sure you've thought about how we'll look if there's no gamma," Brady murmured.

Reyes nodded. "Like employees of the Justice Department."

"With no local police invite and no request through the regional field office."

Reyes tilted his head to look up at Brady, and felt one eyebrow inch up his forehead before he could stop it. "I had no idea you were such a political animal."

"Meaning, paranoid?"

"If there's hell to pay for sending federal employees to address a private-sector problem, it's Celentano who'll get the bill."

Brady puffed air out his nose. "I was thinking more in terms of housecleaning than bill-paying."

Would that be such a bad thing? It depended on how well the trash was buried. "One could make a good case that we've got no business here. But since we *are* here, let's do the job."

Then they were at the door, and whatever Brady wanted to say, agreement or objection, had to wait.

The Dean of Student Life came from her office into the reception area to meet them. Tamara Belker's skin reminded Reyes of the horse chestnuts he used to pick up in the park when he was small. He guessed her age at somewhere in the last half of her forties. She had an eagle's beak of a nose, a long, squared-off chin, and cheekbones broad and flat as a planed board. Her tight-coiling hair was cropped nearly as close as his own, and dyed cayenne red. She wore black trousers and a black-and-white tweed jacket. Every

motion of her body, her hands, her face, said, "Don't worry. I've got it covered."

It must have been habit, because Reyes was pretty sure she knew she didn't, not this time.

"Dr. Reyes." Belker put out her hand to him. "Thank you for coming. This is your team?"

There was no doubt in her voice, which made Reyes conscious of the picture they made as he introduced them. "Supervisory Special Agent Daniel Brady, Special Agent Nicolette Lau, and Special Agent Charles Villette." Brady, towering and golden as a Norse fantasy; Lau, like a small, shining knife honed so sharp you'd never feel the cut; and Chaz, an elongated neatly-dressed scarecrow, hands in his pockets, shoulders lifted, and eyes cataloguing the room.

And a well-dressed black man with a doctorate in charge of them all. The only way his team could more thoroughly spit in the eye of tradition would be to add an agent in a wheelchair. Maybe J. Edgar Hoover had been dead long enough after all, and taken his cookie-cutter agents with him to the grave.

"We can talk in my office," said Belker, meaning, of course, that they shouldn't talk where they were.

Reyes admired the silent language of the room Belker led them to. Everything in it had been top-of-the-line the previous decade. Now the furniture was lightly scuffed or faded. To a gathering of students, or to their parents, the room said, "We don't spend your tuition on administrators' offices."

He knew the language because years ago he'd heard and seen it spoken on a daily basis. Ah. That was where the tension in his belly and back were coming from: the past. He kept expecting to outlive it, but it was like malaria, sleeping in his cells until something woke it up.

Funny, Sullivan College was nothing like the University of Chicago. Tamara Belker was nothing like...anyone he'd worked with. And the part of him that might once have belonged to a place like this and the greater community it represented had withered like a disused limb.

It was a big room, with an angular burnt-orange couch and three compact armchairs, besides the task chair behind the teak desk. Instead of sitting in that, Belker took one of the armchairs. Reyes sat at the end of the couch closest to her. Chaz took a chair, balanced lightly at the front edge, and Lau another, and Brady sat, last as usual, next to Reyes.

Belker leaned forward, elbows on her knees, palms pressed together in mid-air. "This may be a difficult subject, but I have to bring it up before we go any further. The college prefers that you keep this...this case, and your presence, low-profile."

Beside him, Brady stiffened. *Don't ask, don't tell*, Reyes thought. He hoped Lau and Chaz weren't suppressing any adrenal reactions; two of them was enough. "We need to be able to do our work."

Belker nipped her lower lip and dropped her gaze to her hands. When she raised her head again, she'd resolved something. "So do we. If we become fodder for the wire services on a daily basis, that won't happen." The look she fixed on Reyes probably turned disruptive students to stone. "I'm an old friend of Victor Celentano's. So I know he wants his unit covered in glory and immune from budget cuts. Sullivan is not the place to accomplish that, whatever instructions you have from him."

Reyes relaxed into the couch cushions and let himself have the smile he wanted. "If we did have instructions, we'd ignore 'em. It's too early to be sure, but based on our preliminary profile, one of the things the UNS--the perpetrator wants is to upset the campus. We're not going to help him do that."

Belker blinked, and Reyes thought he might see her flush if her skin were lighter. "No offense, Agent Reyes?"

He kept his face bland and businesslike. "I'm also pretty well acquainted with Victor Celentano."

The muscles around her mouth puckered, but her smile won the wrestling match. "Let me call the head of campus security. I think she'll be the most help to you."

She stood and went out the door into the reception area. Brady leaned over and murmured, "I don't think you're supposed to talk about your boss in front of your reports."

Reyes raised his eyebrows. "There goes the chain of command."

Brady snorted.

*

Ingrid Lessing, head of campus security, met the four of them outside the administration building. Brady knew enough about wearing a uniform to see she was comfortable in the pressed light-blue shirt and navy trousers with their stitched-in creases. The easy authority in her stance reminded Brady more of real police than rent-a-cop. She was unarmed, of course. This was a top-dollar boutique liberal arts college, the kind of place that bred generations of alumni who voted for gun control.

In a perfect world, that would mean she wouldn't need to shoot at anyone.

She was tall, fit without being skinny, and wore her graying blonde hair in a grown-up pixie cut. The skin below her right eye, into her hairline and down her jawbone to her collar, was pocked and shiny with scar tissue.

Reyes introduced his team. Somehow Lessing managed the blocking so she acknowledged them pleasantly and didn't shake hands. It was so smooth Brady didn't notice until the moment had passed, and she was saying, "I'll point out the campus landmarks on the way to my office."

Chaz dodged handshakes, too, if not as gracefully. Chaz did it because he had Issues about touching and being touched. Why did Lessing?

As they started down the sidewalk, Brady snuck a look at Chaz and raised his eyebrows, hoping Chaz would know it meant, *Did you see that?* Chaz's face gave a near-microscopic twitch in response. Brady had no idea what it signified.

Telepathy still not working. Check.

Reyes and Lau followed close behind Lessing, with Chaz and Brady bringing up the rear. The sidewalks edged and crossed the open, vivid-green sea of lawn, connecting eventually to the red-brick buildings. Mature oaks cast clouds of shade over benches and grassy slopes, and kids flopped in them with books and takeout coffee cups and laptops.

"The whole campus has wireless?" Brady asked.

"Yep. You need a Sullivan password to log on, but you can get signal everywhere, including some of the rental housing close to campus."

In the courtyard of a classroom building, two students, male and female, were handing out flyers to passers-by. Brady watched the most common dynamic: accept flyer without eye contact, crumple and toss into the trash can by the door, say something to companion, laugh. Some students kept the flyer.

As Brady watched, a girl with a pierced lip and a flying fish tattoo showing at the edge of her tank top waved a flyer like a baton. "Then what about Jews?" she demanded of the paper-slingers. "Christianity is based on Jewish law. Don't you respect that?"

The guy, stocky with jock-short hair, answered earnestly, "It's because the Jews fell away from God's word that He had to send His son Jesus Christ to us. His lesson supersedes the Jews' laws."

Brady had heard that one before. The Christian jock and his partner, a blonde girl with a pageboy haircut and an embroidered pink blouse, parted and smiled politely at the Authority Figures as the team passed. Brady plucked a crumpled flyer from the trash and smoothed it as he walked.

"Fellowship dinner," he muttered, "Students United In Christ, college-approved free-speech house, live in God's uncorrupted light with fellow Christians. All right, then." They passed another trash can, and Brady dropped the flyer in. "This doesn't seem like a Fundie kind of campus."

"They go where the sinners are," Chaz said. His voice sounded a little hollow. Brady pretended not to notice.

Sugar maples, turned by early cold nights, shed orange-yellow leaves like spilled paint across grass and concrete, sun and shade. If you were going to go nuts from teenage hormones, pressure, and maybe the anomaly, it was a pretty place to do it.

As Lessing named the buildings they passed, Brady listened--less to the content than how she said it. Student union, art center, anthropology, history, language arts, the new drama center and science building, the chapel. Lessing liked the place. She approved of it. And she forgot, just a little, that Sullivan College wasn't on the radar for people who didn't belong to it.

They paused at the curb of the city street that bisected the campus. Brady used looking for traffic as an excuse to make a status check on Chaz.

Chaz's hands were stuffed in his jacket pockets, as if he were afraid of what they'd do if he let them out. That pushed his shoulders up, because his arms were so long. His eyes obeyed the direction of Lessing's waving hand and narration (field house, student activities office, dorm, dorm).

Chaz looked where Lessing pointed, but from his face, Brady would swear he was seeing something else. Or nothing at all. Or straight through all the brick and glass to the people inside, watching their hearts beat and lungs work.

Brady couldn't tell from Chaz's face whether he approved of all that breathing.

Then Chaz caught Brady's eye, and his expression wasn't there to study anymore. All it left behind was a mild blankness, and a chill in Brady's guts.

Give him time. If he wants to talk, he'll talk. Brady longed fiercely for Hafidha, for Worth. Chaz didn't open up to Daniel Brady, no matter how much he might need to.

The campus security offices claimed a strip of rooms in the first floor of one of the angular residence halls built in the '60s. The exterior was brick, but once inside the glass double doors Brady could see it was only a shell around three stories of concrete block. Even the interior walls were block. Maybe in the '60s Avon, Wisconsin was on the list of first-strike nuke targets.

Lessing led them past the security dispatcher's office--she waved as she passed the door, and the dispatcher, a square-faced, middle-aged woman, waved back--and showed them into the next room. Lessing's own office, obviously, or an office for anyone else with authority. The concrete was painted khaki. The window looked into the wide grassy quadrangle circled by dorm buildings. A detailed map of the campus hung on the wall opposite the window, next to the door. The desk was brown steel, the desk chair's vinyl showed padding through a split in the backrest, and the visitors' chairs were chrome and molded plastic, and stackable.

If he ignored the view out the window, Brady could believe he was in an underfunded police department back office. He felt right at home.

They hadn't all sat down before Lessing said, "Tell me what you need. I've got copies here of our dispatch logs and incident reports, and my people are prepared to talk to you whenever you're ready. What else?"

Chain of command. Ranking agent takes lead, unless there's a reason to do otherwise. Brady waited to see how Reyes would open.

Reyes sat neatly erect in the crappy plastic chair, as if he were doing it a favor. As if he were the Federal Bureau of Investigation the way monarchs were supposed to be their kingdoms. "The summary we have mentions incidents that wouldn't result in calls to security."

Lessing, to her credit, took a beat or two before she replied. "All I've got on those is rumor. They're the kinds of things that happen on college campuses all the time, so I haven't considered 'em in my stats. I don't know how they're relevant, but then I can't figure out how any of this stuff can be connected."

"But you think it is," Lau offered gently. Not so much Good Cop to Reyes's Bad as Therapist to his Authority Figure.

"Small geographic area with a uniform, stable population and a rapid significant spike in reported crimes? Yeah."

Ah-hah. "I was in Dallas homicide before I joined the Bureau," Brady said, knowing the team would let him run with the connection. "Where were you?"

"St. Louis, Central Division." Lessing shrugged one shoulder. "Patrol."

"Uniforms do all the work, investigation gets all the credit."

She grinned; the scar tissue puckered like a cloud of dimples on the right side of her face. "Did I say that?"

"Why'd you quit?"

Lessing's eyes narrowed, though the smile stayed. Too smart to be lured in by a little ex-cop *bonhomie*. "Maybe I was fired." Then she relented. "Shotgun at a robbery made me re-examine my priorities." She held her right hand up next to her face. Probably about the same position it was in when the shot hit her. The first joints of her index and second finger were missing. It explained why she dodged handshakes.

She knew they'd verify her story. She couldn't know that four ACTF brains had just checked off the box marked "previous trauma."

"How *did* you hear about the other problems on campus?" Chaz asked. Good. Chaz knew that he and Lau could ask and not sound like Authority asking Lessing to account for her results.

Lessing turned her left shoulder toward the window. One shoulder to the college, one to the Feds. Was that how she saw herself? "Part of the job of campus security is to keep the town cops off campus. The assumption is that we know the place and the people. We know what's a prank, what's actually dangerous. We don't bust kids for drinking beer in their rooms; we bust 'em for selling beer to minors. We don't hassle students who smoke a joint on campus. Avon police can't come onto Sullivan property without a call from us.

"But it only works if we really do know the place. We walk a line between 'We're here to help' and ass-kicking, because people on campus have to trust us. We're like old-fashioned beat cops. Neighborhood policing. I won't keep an officer on staff who can't manage some kind of rapport with the kids."

"So you heard from the students?"

"I heard, or my second shift supervisor, or one of the other guards, or a dispatcher. You can see why I have to treat them as rumors or pranks. Some of 'em we looked into informally, since they involved school facilities like the campus health center."

Reyes lifted his chin. It dragged Lessing's attention to him like a deer spotting a hunter in a stand. "We don't have any paper on those."

"Three kids got notices on health center letterhead, all on the same day. One was a pregnancy test, two for STDs. They said the kids tested positive." During Lessing's explanation, Brady saw Chaz pull his legs under his chair and lay an unconscious protective hand over the bend of his arm. "The health center asked for our help when one of the kids threatened to sue."

"Why didn't you write an incident report?"

"I would, now. This was before the vandalism. The letters came through campus mail, so there's no way to track them. All I could do was keep an eye

on the volunteers at the health center, to catch or clear them. And yes, I checked their alibis for the things that happened later."

"So we're looking for someone with a lot of physical access around campus." Brady watched Lessing as he said it.

"At a small school full of bright kids with a lot of resources. Welcome to my world. What we have to put up with from the physics and chemistry departments alone would give you a heart attack."

"You haven't looked closer to home?"

Lessing's eyebrows disappeared into her hair. "My people? Of course I have. They've got the keys. They're also background-checked to hell and gone, and have no motive for any of this shit. I could see somebody having a mad on for one person, or a few people. But there's no connection between the victims."

"So far," Reyes said, because he was still playing Top Dog.

"So far. Look, you know there's no way to completely secure a building. We'd need someone on every door 24-7. Camera coverage is spotty on campus, because we've never needed it much, and what isn't needed isn't funded. And if, by some miracle, we caught the vandalism and arson and theft on tape--how does that help with the assault in the cafeteria? Or the suicide?"

Brady could hear the tightness in her throat. "Was there an inciting incident for the suicide?

Lessing scuffled aimlessly at the papers in front of her, as if she wanted to burrow into them. "She said she got some e-mails. Somebody seemed to know she was on the run from a conservative Christian background and wanted her to feel guilty about it. Her boyfriend broke it off--his name and number are in those files, you'll probably want to talk to him."

"Gildersen was one of the student security dispatchers."

Lessing nodded. "Who don't, by the way, have the keys. And who I also check out pretty thoroughly. Complete with a polygraph before I hire 'em."

Brady resisted the impulse to point out that if polygraphs were perfect, half the cops in the world could go home. "You might have missed something."

He watched her jaw work, and saw when she let go. "Yeah. I've got my staff list here, too, with the dates and shifts everyone worked. I'll help you set up interviews. I've also got lists of faculty and staff who work in the buildings with break-ins."

A double-tap knock at the door swiveled all five heads in the room. "Come in," Lessing called, in a voice guaranteed to make it past the proscenium arch and to the back of the hall. Definitely enough to be heard outside the steel door.

It angled open, and a square-faced, rosy-skinned man with smooth brown hair stuck his head in. Brady saw the same blue shirt collar at his neck that Lessing wore.

"Ooops," said the new guy. "I'll come back later."

"No, now's good. Come in, Tim, and shut it behind you."

Brady stood up to offer his chair. The new guy shook his head and waved his hand palm-down.

He was Brady's age or a little younger, and noticeably shorter than Lessing. Not big enough to have played football, but he'd likely made his college wrestling team proud. His shirt stretched across his pecs rather than his stomach, which was more than Brady could say for a lot of cops he'd met. Though he wouldn't flag this man as ex-police.

"Tim Miner," Lessing announced. "He's the supervisor for second shift. Tim, meet the FBI."

Lessing made the introductions, and Brady shook hands when his name came around. Miner had small, square hands and a grip like a junkyard dog. Brady smiled and squeezed right back. When Miner shook Lau's hand, she couldn't hide the wince. Chaz managed to be out of reach; Miner had to settle for a nod from him.

"Don't know how you can crack this," Miner said. "But it's worth a try. The whole campus is looking over its shoulder."

Lau hunched forward in her chair, hands clasped. "Who first realized you had a problem?"

"That would be me," Lessing said. "I told Belker. Just before Cat--" Lessing swallowed, and didn't seem to care about hiding it. "--Gildersen killed herself, we began to suspect the incidents were related."

"I'm glad you called us," Reyes said, soothing now, reinforcing good behavior. "If all these incidents have a single cause, there's a clear pattern of escalation, which means a growing threat. We'll review what you've got, and draft a list of witnesses we'll need to talk to. You can help us with that?"

Lessing nodded. She probably knew Reyes could have ordered instead of asked.

"I'd like to house the team as close to campus as possible."

"Hell, we can put you *on* campus, if you want. They're remodeling one of the old dorms as a B & B for visitors."

Meaning enrollment was down, Brady realized. Another source of tension.

"That would be ideal," Reyes said.

"There's only three suites finished, so two of you will have to double up." Lessing's gaze bounced off Reyes and across Brady, but she stopped herself before she looked at Lau. "Unless you want the Ramada Inn after all, but it's across town."

"We'll be fine," Brady said, as much for Reyes as for Lessing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Chaz's head move, a tuck of the chin that almost passed for a flinch.

That's new. Well, Brady would give him as much emotional and physical elbow room as he could, and it would have to do.

"Tim?" Lessing turned to Miner. "You want to show the agents over to Voegle and get 'em checked in?"

"Glad to."

She picked up the fat manila envelope from her desk and passed it to Reyes. "Anything that's not covered in there, I'll try to find for you."

Miner led them outside and across the quad to the corner opposite the security office. Voegle Hall was a narrow three-story building that shared a

wall with the larger dorm beside it. They were both old pseudo-Colonial style, with arches of wood-framed glass above the heavy paneled doors.

Inside the front door was a tiny sitting area to the left, and a reception desk on the right. The place smelled of lumber and paint and wallboard gypsum, though there was no sign of remodeling chaos. At the desk, a young woman with skin the color of old pennies and a head full of freshly-done braids handed them four key cards. "Second floor," she said, aloof as Old Money. "Reserved parking in the lot behind the building. The dining room's not finished, but you can use the college food service next door for breakfast. Just show your keys."

Brady heard Chaz draw a long breath through his nose and let it out. Was that good, or bad? "I'll pray for French toast," he told the receptionist, more to see what Chaz would do than to try to make her smile. Which was good, since she didn't smile. And Chaz ducked his head, which hid his face with a grove of hair.

Brady dropped his key card in his jacket pocket. "I'll move the car. If I can remember how to find it."

He could, of course. Reyes met his eyes for an instant, lowered his chin just enough that it counted as visible.

"I'll take you back over," Miner assured Brady.

Yes, you will, and thank you for volunteering before I maneuvered you into it.

After all, as Lessing herself said, campus security had all the keys.

They strode back through the dorms and down the short row of houses with Greek letters on the roof peaks or lawns. The air already smelled like autumn, dry decay and moist earth, and fallen leaves scraped pavement under their feet as they walked.

"Nice place," Brady said. "I wouldn't mind pounding a beat, if it were all like this."

Miner shook his head. "You'd mind in January, trust me."

"Worked here long?"

"A year. I came on last fall term. Did corporate security in Milwaukee before that. Sat at a desk and signed people in and out, called somebody when the

elevators quit working, escorted new fires out of the building and checked to make sure they didn't take company property with 'em. Worst job of my life." Miner said it peaceably, without heat, the way one did when living well turned out to be the best revenge.

"I expect the kids here can be a pain in the ass," Brady offered. When Miner looked a question at him, he added, "Add rich-kid entitlement to just plain not grown up yet, and you must see a few who could use a boot to the butt."

Miner smiled. "Oh, maybe. But they like to talk to you. They probably figure everybody's middle-class, right? Not like the guys with the snazzy leather briefcases."

"Little snobby at the old job, were they?"

"I guess for some people, working stiffs are like furniture." Miner shrugged. He didn't seem to take it personally, whatever the story behind the comment was. "I figure it's their loss. You never know who's going to say the thing you need to hear, you know?"

Brady agreed, and didn't mention how much the sentiment applied to his current assignment.

"You're in visitor parking?" Miner pointed with his chin past the building with the white cupola. "Right behind Administration there."

So Miner didn't express hostility toward Sullivan College or its inhabitants or his work, not in a casual fishing expedition, anyway. An easygoing guy, just right for getting along with a campus full of strong-minded, opinionated teenagers and adults. Lessing seemed to know how to hire 'em.

Brady used parking the car behind Voegle as an excuse to scout the back entrance. His key card worked there, too. The shadowy space under the back stairs bristled with five-gallon plastic paint buckets, long-handled rollers, and crumpled canvas drop cloths. He hefted the team's go bags, two in each hand, and jogged up the stairs just for the satisfaction of knowing he could.

*

Quick, heavy footsteps in the hall. Reyes kept his face turned to the campus security duty roster in his lap, but he still saw Chaz raise his head from his laptop and watch the door, one hand on the trackpad, the other loose in his lap near his holster.

Once that would have been abnormal behavior in Chaz. After what he'd been through, however, hypervigilance was logical as breathing. So long as it didn't control him, Reyes refused to allow himself to worry.

Brady appeared at the open door to the room, weighted down with everyone's bags. "Some roomie you are," he said to Chaz, whose hands were now on the keyboard and had no relationship to his weapon. "We barely move in, and you're having a party already."

"Hey, I'd have helped with those." Lau unfolded her legs and bounced off the foot of one of the double beds to lift her bag and Chaz's off Brady's right arm.

"The last three steps nearly killed me, but I didn't have a hand free for my phone." Brady wasn't even breathing hard.

"Their rooms are *tiny*," Chaz said, by way of belated explanation. He was visibly more relaxed than he'd been since they left D.C., in the controlled space of the room with just his teammates. *He'll get better*, Reyes insisted. It didn't happen all at once.

Brady frowned around the room, pretending to doubts about the blue-on-blue striped wallpaper and oak wainscoting, the crisp white duvets with the obligatory silly bedscarves, the pair of wing chairs flanking a tea table, the two long windows looking out over the quad. "Tell me we don't have to share a bathroom with Lau."

Lau stuck out her lower lip and poked him in the stomach. "Hey! I shower faster than you do."

"I've got more surface area," Brady said placidly. Lau snickered.

"Private baths, mini fridges, and coffee makers." Reyes gestured to the door beside the closet, and the coffee pot on the dresser. "Sullivan doesn't want to lose any visiting parents to the Ramada, it seems."

Brady handed Reyes his bag and dropped his own at the foot of one of the beds. "Ramada's probably cheaper. And I'll bet you twenty bucks we wake up to the sweet sounds of construction."

"Don't take it," Chaz muttered, smoothing a campus map on the bedspread and swiveling his gaze between that and his screen. "I saw a power screwdriver on the next landing up."

Reyes raised his eyebrows at Brady. Brady shrugged. "Anyway. Tim Miner's been here for a year. Seems like a rock. We'll see what his background check looks like, though."

"And Lessing's." Lau shrugged out of her suit jacket, dropped that and her dress shoes on her bag by the door, and thumped onto the foot of the bed again. It was a casual, unselfconscious move, the sort that usually led Chaz to pretend not to watch. But Chaz's attention was on his screen.

"She's included herself in the personnel files she passed along," Lau continued. "Worked security here for nine years, head of security for the last five. If the target is the college itself, I don't see what she'd get out of this. Besides, she's the one who blew the whistle."

"Which is just what she'd do, if she wasn't getting the level of response she craved." Reyes tapped the duty roster. "The security staff is small, with overlapping shift rotations. Even limiting ourselves to guards and dispatchers on duty during incidents, we've got four, maybe five possibles in the security office itself. And off-duty staff are free to come and go on campus with no logs to track them."

"Also true of students," Chaz said. "But instructors at this end of campus would be likely to be noticed. So would office staff."

Lau planted her elbows on her knees and propped her chin on her knuckles. "A lot of the incidents wouldn't require the UNSUB to be around when they happened. Spreading rumors, encouraging quarrels, inciting a suicide."

"But he wants to be, doesn't he?" Chaz looked around the room. "These are all personal, emotional attacks. It's not about property damage. It's about that punch to the gut. The sick feeling and how it shows up on your victim's face. You--he has to be there."

Chaz's expression grew pinched and shuttered. Brady, who'd been watching Chaz almost as relentlessly as Reyes had, must have noticed that, and the verbal change of direction as well; his eyes skidded to Reyes, flicked away. No, Chaz didn't usually identify with the gamma, but it was a legitimate technique. Even if it made Chaz uncomfortable.

"He'll be at the scenes," Lau said.

"Chaz, get Hafidha to start combing the web for images people have posted from the incidents." *Camera phones,* Reyes thought. *Not just annoyances anymore.* "I want you to study them for anyone who might have been at every one."

Chaz frowned. "That might not be much use on a campus this size."

"It could still narrow our suspect pool."

Brady shook his head over a handful of police reports. "If the point is to kick the college itself--to screw with its reputation or cut into enrollment--some of these attacks are pretty low-yield."

"But they're all very effective in producing distress in the campus population," Reyes noted. "If he's targeting a group for cause, there's a connection between the victims that we haven't found yet."

"Or the point is flying shit for its own sake," Brady finished. "And our scumbag of the week gets off on that."

"On chaos and hurt," Lau said.

The conditions in which the anomaly seemed to thrive. "Either way, the appearance of the FBI on campus is going to affect him. If he doesn't already know we're here, he soon will. Chaz--" Reyes began.

"Victimology," Chaz said, like an answer to a question too often asked in class. "Establish correlations. Dorms, majors, schedules, professors, extracurriculars, habits. And the images."

"Good. Brady, Lau, let's make some interview lists."

Act III

Sullivan College had eleven residence halls, each with its own resident manager. The managers were seniors, or in one of the very few post-grad programs Sullivan offered, or simply hanging on for an extra year waiting for their ideal job or an opening in a master's program somewhere else. They were an interface between students and the housing office. They settled conflicts, made minor repairs, and kept order in their dorms, and sometimes offered tea and sympathy to the homesick, the heartbroken, and the hyper-stressed.

They were also likely to be an audience, appreciative or otherwise, to most campus angst. Lau's first job was to gather information from that potentially rich source of gossip and insider information. Her second was to look for the traits of an emerging gamma or a developing psychopathic personality among the resident managers themselves. She set up with a list of names and her cellphone in a small meeting room in the student union, and arranged to talk with each of them.

She was far from the only person in the student union using a cellphone. But most of the students she spotted were text messaging. Of course: in class, in the library, in the dining hall, texting was silent and private. Which meant Lau could conduct interviews without having to shout. She made herself comfortable at a table and let her subjects come to her.

The resident manager of Cooper, Maia Siu, also worked in the college dining hall, and was present when the fight broke out during dinner. But the two students involved lived in other dorms, and she didn't know them. Vin Chamberlin, the manager of Bacon, where Cat Gildersen had lived and jumped, knew Gildersen. "Nobody told me she was depressed," he said, with an edge of desperation. "I'm not a counselor, you know? I change light bulbs and tell people to turn down their stereos."

The manager of Stinson, Paula Steenberg, was a sturdy red-headed woman majoring in physics. Steenberg told Lau, "It wasn't just Loreena and the bogus AIDS test results. One of the guys on second floor--someone slipped a photo under his door of his girlfriend lap-dancing some guy at a frat party. He and the girlfriend had a horrible fight. I mean, really scary. I had to force the lock, and his friends broke it up. Nobody was hurt, so I didn't report it. But..."

"What did his girlfriend say?" Lau asked.

"That it wasn't her. I don't know. But even if it was, why would somebody tell Jason that way?"

"Someone wanted to hurt them both."

Steenberg shook her head. "It's just crazy now. Awful. Nobody trusts anybody. I'm--I might take the term off. I don't want to be here right now."

Ken Maloney, resident manager of Rydell, was an International Studies major, and no fan of U.S. government agencies. "I don't have to talk to you."

"Of course not, Mr. Maloney," Lau replied, brisk and friendly and matter-of-fact. "But it might help us find whoever's creating so much trouble on campus. You might keep someone else from dying."

That gave him pause, at least for a moment. But he rallied. "Some of us have a pretty good idea who's behind it. The only time the FBI pays attention to college campuses is to silence dissent and protect their corporate masters."

Lau managed not to say anything snide. After all, sometimes it was true. "What do you believe is provoking the incidents around the school?"

Maloney snorted. "There's a lot of people who don't like schools where kids learn to think. I'm drinking bottled water, and I don't eat in the dining hall. That's all I'm saying." It was, in fact, all he would say.

Karin Sebarski, who managed Williamson, didn't answer her phone. So Lau walked across campus to try knocking. Old-fashioned, but you never knew. And if Sebarski wasn't around, someone else at Williamson might feel talkative.

As she walked, Lau student-watched. A tall, thin, suntanned boy hurtled past on a skateboard, backpack over one shoulder, t-shirt flapping. She thought of Chaz, and felt the familiar almost-pain under her ribcage. How long before he'd reach without considering first? When would he run, skateboard, climb, move without fear of hurting? Six weeks? Six months? Never?

It's my destiny to hold a grudge against other people's fathers.

In her gray tailored pants and jacket, she might as well have been wearing a sandwich board that read "OUTSIDER." Students passing singly and in groups watched her, pretending to ignore her. Several times she saw someone pull out a phone after she passed. Maybe it was a regional thing; but she'd expected more frank stares, maybe even a grin at the poor suit lost on campus.

They were nervous. They distrusted strangers. They were waiting for the next bad thing.

Something about it scratched at the back of her brain. It was perfectly reasonable, in a paranoid way, to be leery of anything out of the ordinary, given the current rash of awful. But there was something not reasonable at work, too. Maybe once she slowed down, she'd see it.

Williamson was an old dorm, and the resident manager's unit was the two-room apartment once allotted to the housemother. The door was a mosaic of flyers: *Don't forget recycling is Wednesday! Put sorted material in the bins by Tuesday night!* and *Dorm meeting first Monday of every month! Bring your topics to Karin by the Friday before if you want them on the agenda!*

Karin Sebarski was fond of exclamation marks.

Lau knocked, not really expecting an answer. But after a pause she heard the thwap of flip-flops, and the clack of the door lock opening. A woman with very pale skin and straight dark hair peered through the gap. "Yeah?"

Lau showed her ID. "Karin Sebarski? Nicolette Lau with the FBI. I'm sorry to bother you. We're helping the college investigate the recent violence and property crimes on campus."

Sebarski stared fixedly at Lau's ID. "Did I do something?"

Lau gave her the "oh, heavens no" smile. "When I was in college, the dorm managers knew *everything*. I'm hoping if I gather all that collective knowledge, we might spot a pattern that will help us. Would you mind talking to me? Just for a few minutes."

"Oh. Oh! Of course not. Come in. Would you like tea? I've got my own little kitchen, it's no problem."

Lau followed Sebarski's gesture and stepped into the front room. It was charming and flowery and, to her eye, expensive by college-student standards. The drapes matched the upholstery on the loveseat and the pad in the white wicker armchair, which matched the desk. Pier One. Not furnished from the Goodwill down in town.

The room was also tidy, rigidly so. Dust free and everything at right angles. It would look pretty in a magazine photo, but in person it looked...well, like a magazine photo.

"No thanks, about the tea," Lau said.

"Oh." Sebarski seemed a little taken aback. "Have a seat. What can I do to help?"

Lau watched Sebarski's thin face and deep-set, intent eyes as she asked her questions. What have you heard? What have you experienced? Where were

you? Are you concerned? Do you have opinions? Lau tried to sound more like a counselor than a cop. Her tone made Sebarski lean forward, skinny hands clenched and head nodding.

She answered Lau eagerly and in oppressive detail. It was as if she was afraid to let silence back in. Still, her answers came down to I Have No New Information.

Unlike Paula Steenberg, the redheaded physics major, Sebarski didn't seem particularly upset by the events on campus.

When Lau ran out of questions, Sebarski said, "Are you...are you with the Behavioral Science Unit?"

After Ken Maloney, Lau wasn't sure what this was leading up to. "It's the Behavioral Analysis Unit now, but yes. We help local authorities with problems with a psychological component, like this one."

Sebarski beamed. "You're a profiler!"

"It's not very much like the TV version."

Sebarski skooched forward on the wicker chair, making it creak. "I'm a psychology major. I was going to go into clinical, but last year I decided I'd get my master's in abnormal and apply to the FBI. You don't have to have been in the police first, do you?"

"No, there are several specialties the Bureau likes to hire." Lau wondered if she ought to tell Sebarski that psych was pretty far down the list, below lawyers, accountants, and engineers.

"I think I could be a good profiler. I've read all the books, Douglas and Ressler and Beale and Hazelwood. I read the Law Enforcement bulletins on the website every week, and I follow all the investigations in the news." She clasped her hands in her lap, like a little girl reciting, and bobbed her head almost imperceptibly, as if approving her own story.

"That's a start," Lau said carefully.

"Can you tell me what you're looking for here? I mean, I'm a good observer. And I'd have an advantage, with the students. I can ask around and pass on anything that seems weird. Do you suspect a student, or somebody from off campus? Have you got a profile yet?"

When Sebarski stopped for breath, Lau asked, "Did you feel safe on campus at the beginning of this term?"

Sebarski blinked, as if she hadn't thought about it. "Well, yes."

"How do you feel now?"

"I... Fine. Campus security is always around. And there's lights on everywhere. And you know, all the damage that's happened... I mean, I might be afraid if I were homosexual, or foreign--" Sebarski seemed to realize she was talking to a woman whose last name was Lau, and changed direction. "My dad gave me pepper spray my freshman year, but I've never had to use it."

The thing scratching in the back of Lau's head had grown claws. If she hadn't been highly trained in answering questions from the media while thinking about something else entirely, she might have offended Sebarski in getting out of her dorm room. Instead, her last view of the woman was the vast stretch of her smile through her slowly-closing door. Lau hurried toward the exit and the quad, yanking her phone from her pocket.

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"Rape," said Lau's voice through the cellphone at Reyes's ear, and he stepped over to one of the benches that looked over the rolling lawn and sat. She sounded as if he'd need to.

"That's the number one article of fear on any college campus," Lau went on. "Serial rapists. College campuses are perceived as prime hunting grounds for sexual predators, and there are enough instances of it every year around the country to feed that fear."

"But there's been no instance of rape here," Reyes said, and as the words formed and left his mouth, he realized what she was saying. "If this UNSUB wants to terrorize the campus, it's among the first attacks he'd use."

"Except he didn't. Why not?"

They both knew one possible answer. "We can't assume we're looking for a woman. Not yet."

"'Course not. But whatever is going on--"

"--that's a significant data point. Good work. How far have you got?"

"I'll have a first pass on the resident managers by six. And I'll ask Hafs to start background checks on a few right now."

"Meet at Brady's and Chaz's room when you're done. We'll find dinner and compare notes."

He slipped his phone back in his pocket. Brady was interviewing as many campus security employees as were available on short notice. Reyes had talked to Buildings and Grounds, housekeepers, food service staff, and the nurse practitioner, the LPN, and the student volunteers at the campus clinic. Chaz...

Chaz was safe in his room, armed with a Sullivan College password and all the internet he could want, tracking down the victimology. Was Chaz content with that? It certainly needed doing. But Reyes was aware of a reluctance in himself to send Chaz trotting around the campus talking to people, drawing the attention of whoever they were hunting.

He can take care of himself. That's why you let him return to the field. But someone still had to do the victimology.

Reyes was tired and frustrated. And homesick for a home he'd never really had. He was awash in the swells of lawn, the solemn, lofty buildings, and the students who saw it all through a veil of equations, poetic forms, the events of the French Revolution, the paint on a pottery shard.

Reyes longed abruptly to see life through that veil. It blurred detail, but it emphasized the shape. It hid differences and highlighted similarities.

Spotting detail and identifying difference were what he was here for. Detail and difference could save the lives of these children--and there was no question that his quarry would want to take another life. Reyes wondered if he'd known it before the UNSUB did.

He'd intended to pursue knowledge, not people. But the knowledge he most wanted was contained somewhere in human bodies. He wished, suddenly, that Solomon Todd was with the team. Todd would appreciate the irony.

Reyes lifted his head at the sound of footsteps. The figure approached from the direction of the student union: a man in a t-shirt, windbreaker, and jeans, carrying a small zippered duffel. He shook the contents of a snack-size bag

of pretzels into his palm. When he tipped his head back to toss them in his mouth, Reyes recognized the second shift security supervisor, Tim Miner.

"Officer Miner. Off duty today?"

Miner crumpled the pretzel bag and stuffed it in his windbreaker. "Dr. Reyes. Hi there. Yep, 'til five, but I'll take what I can get. How's the investigation going?"

"Very well." Forward, at least. But fast enough to beat the UNSUB to his--or her--next victim?

"What do we know so far?"

Miner was entitled to that "we." He was one of the officers who'd worked the incidents, who'd helped compile the facts Reyes's team was using. But Reyes had to fight down his proprietary instincts when local police or an agent from another unit made that statement of ownership and inclusion. *Does not play well with others.*

"Nothing with any certainty." He was aware he sounded stiff. "Once we're confident of a profile, we'll provide it to campus security and the local police."

"I'll bet you've got some guesses already, though. Care to share?"

"If this were a game of charades, I would."

As soon as he snapped the words, Reyes was ashamed of himself. He'd have to tell Brady he'd antagonized an important witness, and Brady would need to distance himself from Reyes to get Miner to open up again.

But Miner, instead of taking offense, shrugged his wide shoulders. "No problem. Just hoping for a jump on the competition, I guess."

Reyes was used to considering his words and second-guessing his responses. One of his wives and several of his co-workers considered it evidence of his manipulative streak, and maybe it was. But he generally knew what to expect from people. When he lost his temper, he knew what to expect then, too.

What he expected was not what Miner had done.

"And who's the competition?" Reyes put a hint of scorn in his voice, a little amusement. *The rent-a-cop wants to buddy up to the federal agent.*

Miner cocked his head. "Well, the bad guy. But I bet sometimes you government guys are your own competition, aren't you? You hear about folks being passed over for promotions, about people backstabbing their bosses to get ahead..." He shrugged. By his manner, these were the distant trials of strangers, nothing to do with him.

If so, why had Miner brought them up?

A tall, good-looking young man pushed through the side door of the science building on their right, carrying a cardboard box that clinked ominously. "Hey, Tim!" he called.

"Hey, Omar. Tell me that's not a distillery in there."

Omar laughed, showing luminous white teeth that must have had braces once. Reyes recognized his brown brushed-leather bomber jacket as Abercrombie's. "Chem lounge has coffee mugs falling out of the cupboards. I talked Schulewitz into letting me cull the herd and take 'em down to Safe Space."

Miner pursed his lips. "Making room for...?"

"More mugs? Entropy wins. But damn, those kids drink coffee like an AA meeting." Omar managed to shrug at Miner and sneak an appraising look at Reyes simultaneously. Miner didn't seem to notice, so Reyes put out his hand.

"Stephen Reyes." He left out the FBI part, for the time being.

Omar wedged his hand neatly into Reyes's. Their fingers were nearly the same shade, but Reyes's showed ashy around the cuticles and knuckles, dry with neglect and years.

"Omar Fuller," said the younger man, smiling. "Pleased to meet you."

Politics, Reyes thought. *Government, academic, corporate, or non-profit. Anything else would be a waste.* The personable rolled off Omar Fuller in waves, overwhelming Reyes's inclination to be jealous of his youth, his looks, or his money.

"What's Safe Space?" Reyes asked, to see how close he was.

"Gay teen center. I'm a counselor." Fuller's grin widened. "Pay it forward, right?"

Non-profit. "Or try, anyway."

"I gotta get this to the car before the bottom lets go." Fuller gave the box a rueful hitch.

"I'll give you a hand." Miner pushed the duffle up his arm and gathered the box out of Fuller's grip. "See you 'round, Dr. Reyes."

Reyes watched them head off toward the residential end of campus.

Sometimes, when talking to others, one learned more about one's self than about them. Reyes already knew he was possessive about information and snappish when pushed. He sometimes recalled he was vain. But that he was jealous of youth and personality was hard to admit even to himself.

Not that he was otherwise coming away empty-handed. He'd learned that Tim Miner was a difficult man to rile. Reyes knew how to control his reactions; Miner controlled his so thoroughly he might as well not have them. If Reyes's ex-wife was right, was that a sign that Miner was trying to manipulate Reyes?

He arrived at the steps of the Administration building without any recollection of the space between there and where he'd talked to Miner and Fuller. He wasn't sure why he was here, except it had been a place to march to, a path with no professional or personal checkpoints or switchbacks to slow him down.

Well, since he was here, he might as well accomplish something.

He was aware that Tamara Belker might have left for the day, but when he asked for her, the student receptionist buzzed her office, and spoke to someone. Moments later, Belker stepped out her office door.

"Dr. Reyes," she said, and smiled, though it would be reasonable to assume that, if he brought news, it would fall in the unpleasant-to-bad range.

"Dean Belker. Any chance I could have a few minutes of your time?"

"Of course. Hold my calls, please, John."

Maybe Belker did expect the worst; this time she sat behind the desk. Reyes sank onto the orange couch again.

"When we investigate a case, we study the victims as well as the crimes themselves. So far, we've found no connection between the victims of the incidents except their connection to the college itself."

Belker tipped her head back and drew a breath. "The college is the target?"

""Not necessarily. But to rule out the possibility, I need more information from you."

"I provided everything we have to the FBI when I asked for your help."

Reyes leaned forward, pressing his palms together. "When you were still concerned with what Celentano might do with the information."

Belker sat very still. "Are you accusing me of withholding evidence?"

"No. I want to find out if you have evidence you don't recognize." Because that would give her an out, if she needed one. "Dean Belker, has anyone in administration, or any of the department heads, received angry letters, e-mails, phone calls, any threatening communications? Or any kind of anonymous note or call?"

Her brows pulled together and down, forming two neat lines over her hawk nose. Did other people really not see thinking as attractive? Belker wasn't just trying to remember; she was trying to figure out what Reyes was asking for. She was counting her weapons and his, and he was pitifully grateful he had arranged dinner with his team, or he'd be asking her if she had plans.

"I haven't gotten any, or heard of any. If it was a college-related matter and not a personal grudge, I think I would have. But I'll check on it for you."

"Thank you. Anything that might be considered a complaint against Sullivan's policies or behavior collectively. Even a complaint about an individual might become the responsibility of the college, in an injured person's mind."

He watched her as he said it, waiting for the flicker in the facial muscles that said, *Yes, I remember that. Yes, that sounds like that flap from last term, last year.* The flicker didn't come. He had, suddenly, less appetite for dinner.

"I'll make the phone calls now," Belker said.

There was nothing more Reyes could do but leave and let her get to it.

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Any college town had a pizza joint. Reyes hoped, with the number of students at Sullivan who'd grown up in Chicago, Avon would have to be supplied with actual decent pizza. The student at the reception desk of their dorm-turned-B&B gave him the name and location of Argenzio's on Main, and swore it was the best Avon could do.

Reyes hoped it was superb. If they came to the conclusions he was afraid of, they'd need the consolation.

While the other three found a parking space, Reyes claimed the long table for six in the most isolated corner and ordered breadsticks, four fried ravioli appetizers, three house salads, and the removal of two of the chairs. They might still be pressed for room to set out the food, but it was the best he could do.

The team came in the door single-file, threading through the red checked tablecloths and the smell of tomatoes and garlic. Lau had point, Brady took last in line as usual, and both wore the casual vigilance that civilians rarely noticed. Chaz, towering behind Lau, spidery in front of Brady, moved steadily enough, but his expression, focused and distant at once, made Reyes glad he'd told the waiter to bring the breadsticks and salad right away.

Ordering went with comfortable efficiency; they ate together often enough to know what worked. The only surprise was when Lau ordered a whole small vegetarian pizza for herself and said to Chaz, "You can nosh my extra." Chaz kept his eyes on the menu and nodded.

Lau looked over Chaz's head to Brady, who met her eyes. His teammates had conspired to worry about him. If Chaz had noticed, he chose to pretend he hadn't.

When the waiter left, Lau wedged a breadstick in the corner of her mouth like a cigarette holder and said, "I'll start. None of the resident managers is aware of a troublemaker, or group of troublemakers, or other identifiable disruptive element. Or rather, if they have a group they think is a pain in the ass, it's a different group every time. In fact, Ken Maloney, manager of Rydell, thinks it's us."

Brady frowned. "What did he say?"

"That he's not drinking the water and not talking to the pigs."

"Paranoia's not a good sign."

"It also doesn't fit this psychopathy, my Log Cabin Republican friend." That made Brady grin, and Lau continued. "Our bad guy's likely to *want* to talk."

"If the UNSUB's point is to stir up the campus, he'll want to inject himself into the investigation as much as he can," Reyes agreed. "He needs to see the effects."

"As in the case of Karin Sebarski." Lau pushed a printout photo of a dark-haired, narrow-faced, staring girl into the middle of the table. "Psych major, fascinated with the BAU, offered to get her Nancy Drew on for us."

"What's your gut say?" Reyes laced his fingers and rested his chin on them.

Lau bit the end off the breadstick and crunched. "It says neurosis, not gamma. But when I talked to her, I realized what's missing from this scenario. Or maybe what's present. The people I talked to are aware of a threat, and they're suspicious and nervous. And the men are just as nervous as the women."

She tucked the photo of Sebarski away as the waiter appeared. He set appetizers at each place, and paused hopefully over the tray of salads.

"Here, there, and there," Reyes said, pointing to Chaz and Lau.

"Rabbit food," Brady purred as the waiter hurried away, and dunked a whole crispy-edged ravioli in tomato sauce and poked it in his mouth.

Chaz accordion-folded a romaine leaf on his fork with agonizing precision while Brady said, "The rumors, the fake health center reports, vandalizing the car and the bicycles, and inciting to suicide, those could all profile as female. But the arson, the fag bashing, and the museum damage are acts usually associated with males."

"Sullivan is very progressive when it comes to gender roles," Reyes said blandly. Lau coughed into her water glass.

"It's true, though." Chaz raised his eyes from his salad plate, acute for the first time that evening. "As sex roles and power change in society as a

whole, our profiles have to change. A lot of the behavior we study is learned, not innate."

"So a woman successful in a traditionally male job might do things we expect more often from men." Brady made his last ravioli disappear. He hadn't once dripped sauce anywhere.

Lau tapped her breadstick against her lower lip. "Like, say, Ingrid Lessing?"

Chaz twisted his head a little on the pivot of his neck, left and sideways. It looked like a substitute for a shrug. "The perceived power relationships would have to go back to childhood. We won't see the behavioral shift consistently displayed for decades yet. Which doesn't mean it's not Lessing."

"Anybody in campus security had means and opportunity for getting up in the victims' private lives," Brady said. "We're pitch dark on motive, though."

"Not exactly." Reyes stretched against the chair back and realized irritably that all three of his tablemates knew it meant reluctance and bad news. "Dean Belker confirmed for me this evening that there have been no anonymous complaints or threats against the college or professors. No one's claimed credit for the disturbances on campus. No one's tried to make contact with the administration."

"He's not targeting the college," Chaz said.

The pizzas arrived, in a fog of garlic scent, and the waiter set plates before each of them. Reyes wished fleetingly for a glass of wine, but he had work to do.

"So the mayhem's all for him." Brady dragged a slice of pepperoni and mushroom onto his plate and went to work on it.

"Can we draw him out?" Lau suggested. "We can feed a bogus announcement to the local news, something he'll have to correct."

Reyes swallowed a mouthful of pizza. Good enough. "Low profile, remember? The college won't approve our going to the media except as a last resort. Besides, if our UNSUB wanted recognition, he'd be in contact with the administration or the media himself. He's getting what he wants already. We have to figure out what it is."

Chaz tugged a slice of Lau's pizza free of its neighbors, mozzarella trailing behind it like crepe paper. He nipped off the point of the triangle and swallowed quickly. "The victims aren't united by anything except the college itself. They're all campus residents. There's no apparent sexual component to any of the attacks. Targets include women and men, no pattern of sexual orientation. Even the false AIDS and pregnancy test results targeted students with pretty moderate sex lives."

Reyes decided the moment called for valor, not discretion. "Meaning?"

"Two of the three each had a single sexual partner, who also claimed to be monogamous. The third wasn't currently seeing anyone. In the case of the AIDS results, both students stated they'd had no opportunity for contact with infected needles." The tightness in Chaz's throat at the end of the sentence was only noticeable if one were watching for it.

Reyes prevented the moment of silence. "But all three had sexual experiences that could have resulted in pregnancy or disease under other circumstances."

Chaz's eyes widened. "If they hadn't, the letters wouldn't have scared them. So the UNSUB had to know that."

Another data point.

"Tell me this guy--or gal--isn't picking targets by mind-reading." Brady bit into a third slice as if he meant to frighten the rest of the pizza into testifying.

Reyes drew a long, careful breath. "Remember the vandalism in the museum, and the arson. If he's getting what he wants, this isn't about picking targets."

His three agents froze in mid-chew, mid-fork motion. "Jason Saito," Brady said.

"Saito was a sadist; he wanted fear. This UNSUB doesn't appear to distinguish between fear, outrage, grief, anger--any emotion strong enough to trump reason. That's what he wants."

Chaz closed his eyes; the parts of his face that weren't built on bone seemed to have sunk. "That's the pattern. He began with harassment, one or two people at a time. Then he figured out how to make more people mad or

scared. Shared grief. Moral outrage. Righteous anger generates a hell of a lot of adrenaline response."

"That's why he skipped over rape." Lau's hands had closed around the edge of the table, and her face was hard. "It would only scare half the campus, and he wanted more."

"Forty-eight percent," Chaz said absently. "Fifty-one counting college employees. Besides, rape doesn't fit the behavioral pattern. Rumors, notes, hate speech, psychological undermining--the UNSUB isn't hands-on. Either physical contact doesn't add to his pleasure, or it actually detracts. The M.O. is gossip and sneak attacks."

"Calling this one as a gamma is still a hell of an assumption." Brady pushed his plate away from the edge of the table and crossed his arms in the space it had occupied.

"True," Reyes admitted. "A non-anomalous UNSUB might be following this pattern, and we haven't figured out why yet. But the behavior we've seen would be consistent with a gamma who's stirring up strong emotions for their own sake."

"For *his* sake," Brady corrected. The tightness around his mouth said, louder than a voice, that it was Brady who'd brought in Saito and had good reason to hate the idea of an emotional predator.

"Damn." Lau sank back in her chair, eyes wide. "And he doesn't even have to manage it all himself."

Brady raised an eyebrow at her, which saved Reyes from doing it.

"Twitter," she said. "God-damned *Twitter*. All around us, kids are sending and receiving 140-characters-or-fewer messages like 'Oh Em Gee some chick splatted off dorm roof Double-You Tee Eff jumped or pushed?'."

The muscles showed in Brady's jaw. "And 'Don't trust health center. They lie to people who have sex. Bet the condoms have holes. Fundies in charge?'"

"You," Lau growled, "are a little too good at this."

"I always was quick at learning lines."

"The Information Age," said Reyes. "All those amygdalae, all those limbic systems, going off like smoke alarms." He rubbed the orbits of his eyes,

raked his fingertips over his forehead and into his scalp. "If he's what we're afraid he is, he won't stop at murder. He'll want a mob."

The team stared, but it was Brady who said, "I really, really hope you've thought of that before he has."

No more than I do, Reyes thought, and knew he didn't have to say it.

Act IV

That there were leftovers at all was a pretty good indicator of trouble. Lau, with neat sleight-of-hand, made sure her styrofoam clamshell ended up in Brady's grip, on top of the one Brady had filled without comment. Without comment, Brady could pretend he was gathering stray slices for himself.

For all he knew, maybe he was.

He wished there was someone he could talk to about Chaz's intermittent remoteness and crappy appetite, about the fucked-up evil shit humans were capable of even without anomalous help. He could talk to Lau, but there was only so much the choir had to say to each other once they got past, "I hear you, brother."

If he were in D.C., he might call someone. No, he wouldn't. They didn't have that kind of thing. Perfectly good, but not just-called-to-chat.

In the hall outside their rooms, Reyes said, "You three get some sleep. I'm going down to the security office to do the equivalent of a ride-along."

"Wake me halfway through the shift. I'll take the butt-end." Brady was disappointed when Lau didn't snicker.

"We'll see," replied Reyes, and jogged back down the stairs.

Brady followed Chaz into their goddamn charming room, and juggled the boxes of leftovers onto the dresser that hid the mini-fridge. "Hey," he said, "you want a crack at these before I put 'em in to get cold?"

Chaz looked up from his go bag, a wad of clothing in one hand and the waterproof zippered pouch of his bathroom stuff in the other. "No thanks."

"When you don't eat, you fall over."

"I've eaten."

"And when you fall over, you can't do the job."

Chaz straightened up. "Are you done? 'Cause if you are, I'm taking the bathroom first."

Chaz, being a grownup, didn't slam the bathroom door. Brady didn't feel grown up at all, and wanted to give said door a good kick and yell through it that some people could behave less like assholes when other people made the mistake of showing they cared whether some people lived or died.

On reflection, the structure of the thought was so complex he doubted he could say it out loud without sounding like a Monty Python routine. He put the leftovers in the fridge and dug his sleep pants out of his bag.

By the time Brady finished his turn in the bathroom, Chaz was only a spiky-looking hill under the duvet of one double bed. He might even have been asleep. Brady rolled into the other bed, arranged himself so as little of him hung off the end of the mattress as possible, and clicked off the lamp.

*

Ingrid Lessing waited for Reyes outside the library entrance. She was a dark, bulky shape in her uniform trousers and navy windbreaker, her radio holster blistering the line of her left thigh. She stood with her arms crossed and her feet a little apart, and Reyes read the edge in her stance from the curb fifty feet away.

If he'd had his own windbreaker, the Bureau-issue one, the visual cues would have been different. Wool suit jackets were for the people at desks who didn't understand the job.

So when he got within hearing, he said, "I'll try not to get in the way, honest."

Her grin was lopsided, but genuine. "Did I sound snotty on the radio? I'm surprised the signal was that clear."

"You sounded very professional."

"Ah, but you're a profiler."

"It's not magic." Reyes walked with her, beside and a little behind, as she followed the sidewalk toward the chapel. "You do the same thing, and did it in St. Louis, too, as part of your job."

"Study behavior." She didn't ask it as a question, but it was.

"Our advantage is, that's the *whole* of our job." He wondered if Lessing knew it wasn't true. Were polite fictions the best kind, or the worst? Especially when you doled them out hoping for non-fiction in return. "St. Louis can be challenging police work. Though I suppose you weren't assigned to the more...urban districts." Reyes let a little sarcasm drip off the word "urban," the new politically correct word for "scary brown people."

Lessing didn't bother to hide her offense. "White girls can't jump?"

"You must have had trouble establishing your authority."

Her voice was low, suited to the setting and the job (night watchmen kept the peace, they didn't disturb it), but she got plenty of anger in, even so. "My guess is, you've never been police. When you are, if you do your job, you try not to be white or black or brown. You try to be *blue.*" She plucked at the front of her windbreaker. "Otherwise you can generate a lot of bullshit that gets people hurt."

"Is that how *you* got hurt?" Reyes tried to fill his voice with the kind of sympathy that made a victim want to rise up out of her hospital bed and kick the speaker.

"This is going to surprise you, but shotguns don't know what color people are."

"What color was the guy who pulled the trigger?"

Lessing stopped and turned to face him. She might have been giving a statement. "The two robbers were white and Hispanic. The clerk was black. He was the one with the shotgun. So it was kind of a friendly fire situation."

Reyes gave her a moment to believe she'd shut him up before he said, "I suppose you feel more in charge on a predominantly-white campus."

"Oh, you bet I do," Lessing snapped. "That's why I'm walking around out here in the dark trying to catch some sonofabitch before he kills somebody. If I didn't feel *in charge*, I'd be sitting on my ass back in the office waiting for the trouble to come to me."

She set off down the sidewalk again, but Reyes could tell she had to make an effort to maintain a patrol pace. She wanted to march off and leave him

coughing in her dust.

"Do your injuries still cause you trouble?"

She didn't answer. Reyes wondered if the rest of their rounds would be made in silence. At last she blew air between her lips and said, "Yeah." She paused to poke her flashlight beam into a dense clump of head-high shrubbery before she moved on.

Reyes decided to pitch her a slow one over the plate. "You liked being a cop?"

"I did." Lessing kept her gaze moving, everywhere but on him. "How about you?"

"As you say, I didn't come to the Bureau from police work."

"No kidding?" She did look at him then, sly amusement, and he knew she was getting her own back for the lecture about profiling. "But you're one now. One way or another, we're all after the bad guy."

Tim Miner, who hadn't been a cop, had put it in the same words. Was that coincidence?

The chapel dated from the early '60s, when college students were required to attend it. The architect had left the campus a structure that was still useful and beautiful now that the college took no responsibility for students' souls. Limestone, he guessed. He couldn't be sure from the landscape lighting, the glow from scattered lampposts, and the light from town that bounced off the overcast.

Lessing checked the front doors: locked. "So?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you like law enforcement?"

Had anyone ever asked him that before? "I like finding out the truth," Reyes replied.

"Not 'catching the bad guy' or 'solving problems?'"

"When you were with the police, how often did you do either of those?"

Lessing opened her mouth, ready with an easy answer. She closed it, and checked the side door, snapped her flashlight on to sweep the shrubbery, shut

it off again. "Doing the first one didn't always accomplish the second," she said at last, looking out over the lawn between the buildings.

"Hell of a job at the end of the day, to know you did what the law demanded, but left the suffering intact."

This time the pause before Lessing's answer was hardly noticeable. "What *did* you do before you became a G-man? Teach poetry?"

Reyes managed to muffle his crack of laughter.

Lessing stopped walking. "And you want to know if I'm the one making these kids suffer, because I resent them having no fucking clue about pain and fear."

So much for fiction, polite or otherwise. "It's why we're here, to find out who it is. The 'because' is part of the process." Yet here he was, wishing he didn't have to press this woman.

Lessing kept her hands at her sides, but they flexed as if she'd like to grip something, crush it, throw it. In the half light, her lips pulled back from closed teeth, and every word came out honed. "Here's the truth, then. They drive me crazy. For half of them, 'poor' means having to take the bus because your parents need both BMWs. They think the worst thing in the world is whatever's pissed them off this week."

She found something to do with her hands at last; she dragged them through her hair. The motion looked fierce enough to hurt. Reyes heard her breathe out once, hard. "But they care. They're clueless, some of 'em, but they give a shit. And when they leave here, a lot of them go to work making the world better. I bust my ass to hire the right people to keep them safe in the meantime."

"Is that why you're working second shift, when you have an officer who's hired to supervise during these hours?"

"Tim does damned good work, but there's him and one other guard to work nights right now. Excuse me if I'm not home watching *American Idol*."

"It's not on tonight," Reyes said blandly.

"It's the stupidest TV show I could think of off the top of my head!"

Reyes smiled. "Good choice, then. Should we get back to making your rounds?"

She glared, then snorted. "Jesus, do people try to kill you very often?"

"You'd be surprised how rarely."

Lessing laughed, a low growl that barely moved air, and her shoulders dropped an inch.

They went on to check the entrances to the next class building. Nothing moved under the trees, across the lawn, in the shadows of shrubbery or walls. Reyes heard cars pass on the highway at the bottom of the hill, in the street two blocks over. A bird rustled in the leaves overhead and fell silent. He turned his suit coat collar up against the slow chill and wished for another layer.

Lessing noticed. "I really can do this by myself."

He shrugged. "It's useful to know the routine."

"You think whoever's fucking with us knows it, too."

Reyes drew a long, cold breath out of the night. "Yes. I think he does."

*

Brady woke without knowing why. When he opened his eyes, a silhouette showed at the window against the light from the quad.

Instinct held him motionless, evaluating. It gave him time to recognize Chaz, one bony ass-cheek propped on the wide window ledge, one zigzag leg folded up to his chest, long-sleeved t-shirt and cotton flannel pants hanging like an unstaked tent on its poles. He was eating a slice of pizza with, from the body language, grim determination.

"Hey," Brady mumbled.

Chaz started and Brady blinked, and for an instant he thought he'd dreamed the whole thing. But Chaz still sat in the window, both feet on the floor now, and the room smelled like garlic.

"Didn't mean to spook you," Brady said.

For some reason, that made Chaz laugh, in a not-funny way.

Brady slid out of bed, trying to look casual about it, and stretched. Something was wrong. If it got wronger, he'd rather not be lying down when it happened.

Chaz still didn't have anything to say, and the backlighting hid his face. So Brady ventured, "If it'd make you feel better to toss your hair like a sixteen-year-old girl and say 'What*ever*,' I promise not to stop you."

Another laugh-like thing, but this one was maybe amused. Also, maybe hurting.

"Was that the last of the pizza?"

Significant, if unreadable, pause. Great actors could say whole paragraphs in silence. Normal people were just silent. "Yeah."

"Damn. You really *are* the worst roommate ever," Brady said cheerfully.

"Sometimes...in front of people especially. It's hard to eat."

The antiretrovirals made patients sick; the side effects sounded a hell of a lot like chemotherapy. Chaz was done with his course of treatment. But the body learned triggers, anxiety responses. It could learn that eating made it sick and refuse to forget the lesson.

Still, Brady wondered about that *in front of people*.

He looked past Chaz, out the long window into the quad. The grass was silver under the scattered post lamps. A bat shivered across the sky, visible against the reflection off the clouds. From where Brady stood, the dorm windows were dark. Early in the term; no finals, no all-nighters. "I bet this is a nice place to go to school."

Chaz turned to follow his gaze out the window. Now Brady could see his face, the stiff, empty look of bullied kids and suspects under questioning. *Name. Rank. Serial number.* Brady fought the urge to step back, and replayed the last few minutes. If that face was for him, he'd done something awful.

Chaz curled his arms around his ribcage, against outside cold, inside hurt, or both. "In college," he murmured, so close to the window his breath fogged the glass, "I was...I felt like I fit in. For once. At least, I wasn't more out of place than anybody else. The things I could do were *worth* something." His

head tilted, until his forehead and nose thumped softly on the pane. He tapped the glass with a fingernail. "I used to belong to this."

Brady was pretty sure there was no right response, and equally certain he had to say something. "You still could, you know." There was no institution of higher learning in the English-speaking world that wouldn't blow its budget to get Charles Villette on the faculty. And a few in the non-English-speaking world would spring for a full-time translator.

Chaz's eyebrows dropped, and his bony jaw thrust forward. He turned his head toward Brady just enough to meet his eyes. "If you tell Dad I'm not fit for field work, I'm pretty sure he'll listen."

Brady sighed. "Shit. I didn't mean that. Do you think you're not--"

He felt it as if someone had hit the ceiling of the room below with an enormous rubber mallet. The sound was close behind--a bass-drum throb, the scream of metal tearing, the glass panes before their eyes smacked against putty and wood.

Brady swept Chaz one-armed to the floor and followed right behind.

Glass broke somewhere, but not in their room. Car alarms commenced to whoop and wail. Brady rolled to his feet and looked out the window. Over the roofs of the dorms that marked the quad's west side, something glowed orange.

When he turned, Chaz was already pulling on his chinos.

*

A blooming of sound, big and spreading bigger, impossible to mistake for anything but an explosion. Except in the still cold air of the campus at night an explosion seemed unreal as a host of angels. It came from behind them.

From the residence halls. Where Reyes's team slept.

As fast as Reyes moved, Lessing was still ahead of him. She yanked her radio out of its holster as she sprinted, shouted into it. *Unit one to base...*

It occurred to him, barely, to look for traffic as they crossed the street that divided the campus. He watched, too, for anyone moving in the opposite direction, away from the noise, from the column of smoke rising over the near roofs. The running itself he didn't notice, though afterward he knew he

must have done it. As they got close, they became part of a current: students, some half-dressed, hurrying toward the scene. Reyes scanned their faces: fear, excitement, curiosity. A rising tide of emotion.

The heat, the orange light, the poisonous smoke and the crackling of flame found them before they rounded the corner to the parking area behind the older dorms. The car itself was violently dismantled: one door burning like a giant wind-carried leaf on the nearby soccer field, the others blown open and warped, safety glass strewn like rock sugar across the pavement and grass and sparkling gold in the firelight. Flames devoured the upholstery, the plastic and vinyl of the dash, and turned them into oily, reeking smoke. Reyes pressed his sleeve against his nose and mouth and blinked hard against the blur of stinging tears.

Then he saw the motion. The driver's side door hung half off its hinges, and a figure slumped out of it, one arm reaching feebly like the twitching leg of a dying spider.

He and Lessing pressed forward against the heat and smoke. The growing crowd of onlookers were stopped by the sheer impossibility, the preposterous horror, of the wreckage in front of them. Reyes shouldered past one boy, shirtless and barefoot in jeans, who was already thumbing at his phone. Just past him, a girl held hers up to grab a photo.

Two figures plunged toward the burning car from the opposite side. An instant's anger--*civilians in danger*--before he recognized Brady and Chaz, the latter with a bundle of white cloth under one arm.

By the time Reyes reached them, they'd managed to lift the victim out of the car onto the sheet. They each grabbed a corner--suddenly Lau was there, too, both fists twisted in the cloth, still in her pajamas--and scurried away from the flames, placing their feet as carefully as they could and hoping the makeshift stretcher would absorb the motion. Reyes spared a look for Chaz, diagonally across the sheet; his face was drawn tight, as the weight pulled at his back muscles.

They settled the sheet and its burden on the soccer field under a street light. Reyes lifted his head at sirens down the hill.

"I called it in before I left my room," Lau said, breathless and calm. Reyes thought the latter was a professional overlay.

Chaz crouched by the man (*Chaz?* Reyes wondered, but was grateful) and sought under the collar of his jacket with two fingers, seeking unburned skin and a pulse. Most of the man's face was scorched black, cracked and weeping blood and lymph in the crevices. The right eye and its eyelid couldn't be told apart in the ruin of the deformed right temple and cheekbone. The man's mouth gaped, shocking red in the black, and his tongue flexed. He was trying to speak.

In a moment of surprise and terror, a human would gasp. A bombing victim would drag super-heated air into his throat and lungs.

The man wore a leather jacket. It was blackened and smoking, but still mostly whole. If the nearest burn center could keep him alive long enough, there might be sufficient skin under there for grafts.

A brown, brushed-leather bomber jacket. And the skin under Chaz's fingers was as brown as Reyes's own.

"Omar Fuller," Reyes said, and the one remaining eye in the man's face turned toward him.

"Oh. Jesus fucking Christ." Lessing dropped to her knees by the sheet and reached out a hand. There was no place to put it, so it hovered, and shook. "Omar, the ambulance is almost here. Can you hear me? Hang on."

Fuller's mouth moved. His tongue made no sound, brushing the scorched roof of his mouth.

Lessing hadn't lied; the ambulance howled into the parking lot, followed by a pair of police cars and a fire truck. All four vehicles shot red and blue light across the tableau from Hell. Reyes stepped out of the way of a paramedic and turned to catalogue it. He needed to know what was here, every horrible item, every vignette, every face.

A security guard kept the frightened crowd of students back from the burning car. By his size, it would be Joseph Womerik, the second of the night crew. The crowd of onlookers had grown. Reyes saw one, three, a dozen with phones out. How many different versions of the event were out there already? How fast could terror travel?

Reyes grabbed Brady's arm. "Tell the police to help Womerik disperse the crowd."

Brady loped off without even a nod. Break up the crowd, fragment the emotional feedback loop. Time was important.

Two male students sidled toward the end of the crowd, as if for a better view of Omar Fuller. One passed a bottle-shaped paper bag to the other.

Womerik's big-man impassive front cracked. He bolted sideways like a running back, grabbed the bag from the student's fingers, and pegged it against a tree with a muffled shattering noise. Reyes couldn't hear what Womerik shouted when he grabbed the two young men by their shirt fronts and shook them.

He hoped Womerik wouldn't be fired for inappropriate physical contact. Because loss of control and failure of judgement were normal when one's emotions ran high.

About half the windows of the dorms facing the soccer field had broken. Chaz might be able to explain why all of them hadn't. Reyes spotted another blue windbreaker: Tim Miner was keeping students from wandering into the area of fallen glass. One boy confronted Miner, flailed his arms, spoke, his face driven by the passion behind the words. Miner nodded, put a hand on the kid's shoulder. The kid burst into tears and Miner nodded.

The ambulance doors slammed; Chaz and Lau stepped back as it shot off down the drive toward, with luck, Omar Fuller's salvation.

Reyes scanned his team. Brady scowled as he helped Lessing brief the local cop, his chest rising and falling, his hands curled into fists. *Yes,* Reyes thought, *We were right here. There was still nothing we could have done.* He'd say it aloud to Brady later and see if he believed him. He wouldn't now. Chaz watched after the ambulance until it turned the corner out of sight, and shivered. Then he folded his arms over his chest. There was nothing in his face at all, and Reyes had no idea what Chaz needed to hear from him, or if it would do any good.

Lau stepped up beside Reyes, absurdly straight-backed and serious in green flannel pajamas printed with doughnuts. "Should one of us go to the hospital and try to get a statement?"

Reyes shook his head. "Fuller can't talk. If that changes, we'll question him then." *If he lives.* "Right now, I want to know what happened to that car, and who was last seen near it."

Lessing walked back from the officers and firefighters taping off the steaming remains of the car. Her shoulders sloped; her head pushed ahead of her when she walked. Brady followed behind, adopting her into the company of those whose retreat he guarded. "The nearest fully equipped bomb unit is in Madison," Lessing said when she came in range. "They're on their way. Until they get here, we won't know how it went down."

"Are you all right?" Reyes found himself asking.

Lessing scrubbed at her face, pushing at the weariness, leaving soot marks behind. "Omar was... He's a big man on campus, I guess you'd say. Track star, organizer, volunteer. A good guy. Popular."

Miner approached them, stopping to talk to straggling students. Reyes heard him say to a girl in a terrycloth robe, "I bet you'll miss him." He couldn't catch the girl's reply.

"I called the housing office," Miner said as he trotted up to Lessing, Brady, and Reyes. "They'll get buildings and grounds to clean up the busted windows and do a board-up. Guess the kids in those rooms will have to bunk with friends."

Reyes watched Miner dust his palms on his uniform pants. "Miner, where would Omar Fuller have been, or where would he be going, at this hour?"

Miner blinked. "Fuller? No idea. I don't really know him."

"You called him by his first name this afternoon, when I was with you."

"I know his *name*. It's a pretty small school. And nobody's formal, you know?"

"He was carrying a box. Did you see what was in it?"

"Fifteen or twenty coffee mugs, maybe. Some cheap glasses. Goodwill stuff."

"But you helped take it to his car."

Miner nodded.

Reyes could imagine Lessing, under the same questioning, asking, "What the hell are you getting at?" "Did you see anything in the car when you got there?"

"Sure. Road atlas, couple empty coffee cups, some papers on the passenger seat, couple books in the back. Pretty much just like a car."

"If there was a bomb, it can't have been there this afternoon," Lessing said. "Why wouldn't it have gone off then?"

"Because it wasn't triggered," Brady said. "Or because it wasn't made right. Or, yeah, because it wasn't there yet." He looked down at Reyes. "We won't know 'til the bomb squad takes a look."

"Do students on campus with cars keep them locked at night?" Reyes asked Lessing.

"We tell them to. We tell them to keep their dorm rooms locked, too. They don't always."

Brady leaned across Reyes to look at Miner. "Did Fuller have a car stereo?"

"Maybe. I guess. I wasn't looking for it." Miner kept the calm he'd used on the students, the steady, even voice and temper that helped get the spectators off the scene, back to their dorms. An asset to campus security.

"Thank you, Officer Miner, Officer Lessing," Reyes said briskly. "Will you ask the police to let us know when the bomb squad arrives? We'll be in our rooms."

He felt Brady's surprise, but he knew Brady wouldn't object out loud. Reyes gathered Lau and Chaz with his eyes, tipped his head in the direction of Voegle Hall and their rooms.

His team was quiet on the way to the building, past the receptionist, up the stairs, and along the hall. Once inside Brady's and Chaz's room, Reyes didn't keep them waiting.

"Tim Miner knew Omar Fuller. We met him this afternoon outside the science building. They knew each other. And Omar Fuller wasn't dressed like a full-ride scholarship."

Brady lifted his chin. "Definitely car sound system. He'd lock the car."

"So either the bomb was planted this afternoon, or..."

Chaz looked up from where he sat on the end of the unmade bed. "If you're helping someone put something in a car, it would be easy to break the door

lock while you were at it."

If one knew how. Reyes didn't want to know if Chaz did, or where he'd learned.

"Miner was the only person on the scene tonight who wasn't upset," Lau said. "But you say he knew Fuller. At the very least, even if someone he knew being blown up didn't get to him, wouldn't Miner be angry that our guy had gotten away with another crime on his watch?"

"Or he'd pretend to be angry, to throw us off," Brady offered.

"Except he *didn't*. As if it hadn't occurred to him."

All those limbic systems, Reyes thought. His team, Lessing, Womerik, the students, all struggling with their emotions. But not Miner.

Someone knocked on the door, and Brady answered, swung the door wide and let in Lessing and a cop in an unfamiliar uniform, carrying an evidence bag. "Petersen, from the bomb squad." Lessing's voice was dull with weariness.

"I know it's early yet," Reyes said. "But did you find anything that might help us?"

"We'll ship the whole thing to your lab when we've got it," Petersen replied. "But I'm guessing amateur. Bigger than he needed. In a box on the seat, maybe. If they'd fastened it to the seat or chassis, it would've concentrated the force of the blast more. We haven't got all the pieces, but I figured you ought to see this." He held the bag out to Reyes.

Through the clear plastic, the long, curved piece of iron was easy to see. So were the marks ground into it. A Christian cross. The letters "GHF."

Brady frowned over Reyes's shoulder, studying the piece of metal without taking it. Suddenly he lifted his head and said to Lessing, "Is Fuller gay?"

She frowned. "Yeah. I don't recall it being an issue."

Brady pointed to the letters on the metal, and raised his eyebrows at Reyes. "God hates fags," he said.

A chill went down Reyes's scalp and back. "Who knows about this?"

Lessing and Petersen looked at each other. "The guy who found it," Petersen said. "Couple of local cops. Security staff. Now you."

"About eight too many." Reyes turned to find Chaz still sitting on the foot of the bed. "Lau's right," Chaz continued. "By now, the whole campus knows."

*

The quad wasn't quiet anymore.

Brady moved from dorm to dorm, watching kids talking, crying, comforting each other. Whenever he came close, the talk stopped until he moved on. Now there were lots of lighted windows in the buildings.

He was a stranger, an outsider, obvious even at night from across the quad. But outsiders might break up the dynamic on campus, slow down the transformation of clusters of students into a mob. That was Reyes's hope, anyway, when he'd sent Brady and Lau out to circulate.

Reyes hadn't sent Chaz.

Chaz was to stay in Voegle and monitor campus websites and Twitter feeds and report if anything looked like blowing up. He and Hafidha were sorting through the mass of posted photos of the car bombing, looking for repeated faces in different shots, who was there and who wasn't. It was a good strategy...except Hafidha could have done it from back in D.C., and freed Chaz up to help on campus.

Chaz had to know he was being kept on the bench. He'd hate it. Reyes had to know that. So what the hell was Reyes thinking?

Brady watched two kids walk off on different vectors as he approached. Chaz wasn't himself right now, it was true. Brady wasn't sure he'd be, either, if he'd gone through what Chaz had. What it looked as if Chaz had gone through, anyway. Chaz wasn't exactly talking.

If Reyes thought Chaz couldn't be counted on, he wouldn't have let him on the plane. How comforting that was depended on how much Reyes's and Brady's standards of risk assessment matched. Reyes thought Chaz could be trusted. To do what?

Reyes would have the facts, such as they were. Reyes had access to the records, the statements, the evidence.

Was that why Chaz wasn't out here now?

*

Lau's phone broke the peace of the south end of campus with its tinny rendition of "Also Sprach Zarathustra." She answered before the third chord burst into the following "TAH-DAH." "Yes, boss?"

Reyes, clipped and intense, said, "Tim Miner's got an apartment in Janesville seven miles north of here. By the time we get a warrant and get up there to search, the situation may be out of hand."

"But he's got to have a car," Lau finished for him.

That Reyes didn't acknowledge that was a kind of praise: *You're keeping up. Good.* "When I saw Miner, before we met Fuller, he was coming from the direction of the student union. He was carrying a duffel bag, and he was out of uniform. He was finishing a bag of pretzels."

"Car parked behind the union?" Lau could imagine it: the drive from home, long enough to rouse the grinding appetite of the anomaly (if, in fact, that was what rode Miner); passing through the student union to grab and eat the calories that allowed him to pass for normal.

"His employee file says he drives a dark blue Pontiac Sunfire." Reyes rapped out the license number. Chaz wouldn't need the help, but Lau fished a ballpoint out of her jacket pocket and wrote it on her wrist.

"On my way," she said.

"Call me when you find it." Reyes broke the connection.

She wanted to jog across the empty space at the heart of the campus. She felt exposed, like a sniper's target. But targets ran. So did people closing in on a suspect. The suspect mustn't know.

The parking area behind the union was small and unevenly lit. *High-risk area*, she found herself thinking, and wondered if people in this pleasant place had had the sense to see it that way, before hell broke loose. It wasn't hard to find Miner's car among the few Toyotas and Hondas and a tiny flock of aging motorcycles.

The front left fender of the Sunfire sported a fist-size dent, and the bumper below it rattled loose on its mounts. The paint was oxidized from being kept

outdoors. Lau saw no sign of an alarm system.

She pressed her face to the drivers' side window, cupping her hands around her eyes to block out stray light. A duffel bag, the one Miner must have been carrying when he met Reyes, slumped on the passenger seat, empty. *Evidence.* Traces of explosive material, if they were lucky. If they could gather evidence enough to get a warrant to search the car.

Lau cupped her hands around her eyes again and peered into the back seat.

Dead leaves, she thought, *raked into a heap.* But the leaves that filled the rear footwell and skimmed over the back seat cushions shone in the slanting light, crinkled plastic and foil, bright printed images and logos.

Snack food bags. Candy wrappers. Cookie boxes. Burger pods and grease-stained bags from take-out chicken. An individual landfill stoked with the residue of a frenzy of eating. No magazines or newspapers or junk mail, no forgotten t-shirts or empty cans of Fix-a-Flat. Not ordinary hoarding. It was all about food.

Lau plucked out her phone with steady fingers, speed-dialed Reyes. "Evidence of compulsive, excessive eating," she said, her voice flat in her ears. "We've got a bug, boss."

Act V

Quick footsteps slapped the sidewalk ahead of Brady, echoed off buildings around the corner and out of sight. Brady kept walking. His jacket was unbuttoned, and his hand knew where the holster on his hip was.

The person who rounded the corner was Tim Miner. His nylon uniform jacket shone like crumpled wet metal in the light from a dorm room window "Agent Brady? Agent Reyes said you'd be out here somewhere." Miner sounded a little out of breath.

"Where's Reyes?" Because Reyes had gone to campus security to ask Miner why he seemed to know so much less about Omar Fuller than he had that afternoon. Brady felt the weight of the Glock.

"He might still be at the security office. He got a call on his cell. Then he wrote this down and asked me to find you and give it to you."

Brady took the folded piece of paper left-handed. Reyes had his cell. Why hadn't he used it to call Brady? He didn't quite take his eyes off Miner as he read.

Find Chaz now. Don't let him out of your sight. Take Miner with you.

It was Reyes's handwriting.

"Did he say anything else?" Brady asked.

Miner's eyebrows met and rose in the middle, like a worried hound, like a cartoon character. Brady had never seen anything but stolid cheerfulness on Miner's face before. The new expression looked strained. "Like I say, there was a call. He seemed...well, as if he was trying not to get upset." Miner paused, for breath or thought or both. "When he gave me that note, he told me to not get near Agent Villette. You know what that's about?"

Brady felt his hands go cold. Every sensible thought in his head struggled to control a tidal wave: Andre coming toward him across the room in Dallas. Frank Scott's staged butchery in San Diego. Joe Lawrence Hakes staring into a surveillance camera with the blank hunger of a shark. A blood-drenched room in an empty house in Texas.

Chaz's voice, dull and distant, correcting Reyes: *Except when it's not.*

What did Reyes count on Chaz to do?

Brady's phone muttered in his trouser pocket: the Texas Sapphires' cover of "Las Vegas."

Reyes hadn't called Brady. But Chaz was calling him.

Brady kept his eye on Miner as he answered the call. "Yeah?"

"Brady, where's Reyes?" Chaz sounded...intense.

"You try his phone?"

"Voicemail. Look, I'm following new Twitter hashtags for 'Omar' and 'hatekiller.' Somebody tweeted that Fuller died at the hospital. Now they're bringing the crazy in dump trucks. The Students United in Christ house on campus looks like where they're delivering it."

"Is it true, about Fuller?"

"I don't know, but wouldn't we have heard it first?"

Someone would have. Who they told would depend on what they wanted the news to do. "Where are you?"

"On my way to the Christian Students' house. I'm calling Lau. See if you can find Lessing and have her meet us."

He should call Lau to warn her. He should get to Chaz before Chaz got to anyone else. He should keep Miner in sight and away from anyplace he could make the situation worse. Donkey, bale of hay, wolf. (*Two wolves,* whispered his back brain.) "I've got Officer Miner right here," Brady said, to see what the response was.

"Brady, I think--shit. Never mind."

"Chaz--"

"Just watch your back." And Chaz was gone.

The post lamps cast the wrong color light, but Brady thought Miner was flushed.

Miner might not be a gamma. But Brady was pretty sure-- Then he remembered Jason Saito, who in his own way had taught Brady how to guard his thoughts and feelings.

He didn't trust Miner. But Miner couldn't know about betas and gammas and Chaz's damage. He wouldn't have known the button was there to push. And the note was in Reyes's handwriting.

Two wolves.

"Where's the Students United in Christ house?" Brady snapped. Chaz would know. The campus map would be in his head.

"I'll show you."

"Do it at a run." Brady had Lau on speed dial. He could run and call at the same time.

*

In the dim light of the back stairwell of Voegle Hall, Reyes checked his watch and swore. No Brady, no Miner.

Miner might not have gone to find Brady. He might have walked straight out of the security office and into the wind, driving away in that car absurdly,

chillingly full of takeout trash. But the only thing Miner had that resembled an emotion was the boundless confidence of the sociopath and the pleasure of thriving in plain sight of his enemies. Reyes was sure of it. He wouldn't be able to walk away from whatever turmoil Reyes's note was going to cause Brady. It was the only way to ensure that Miner would follow Brady to Voegle rather than rushing to the SUC House to bask in his handiwork.

It was also a last test. A garden-variety sociopath might bolt. But a gamma hooked on the adrenaline rush of strong emotion wouldn't be able to resist the bait Reyes had dropped.

Brady, Chaz, and Reyes would isolate Miner in the room in Voegle Hall, keep him distracted from the turmoil outside, take him into custody. Lau should arrive any minute. Miner, in the early stages of his manifestation, wouldn't be more than the four of them could handle.

Unless Miner really was reading minds, and not merely emotions. Reyes had worked himself up when he pretended Lau's call was about Chaz; his suspicion of Miner should have been tangled in fear, anger, anything else he could churn the situation into. But if Miner knew he'd been tagged, he'd bolt.

Reyes hoped the rest of the team had put the clues together. He hoped they'd understand why he hadn't said aloud, *Miner is the gamma*. Put it into words, and the brain prioritized it, gave it authority. Put emotion behind it. If they hadn't understood before they closed the net around Miner, it would be all right, because gathered together in that room where their quarry could do no more damage, Reyes would simply tell them.

Now they weren't gathered.

When they got back to D.C. would be soon enough to observe that, if Reyes's guess was right, Miner's abilities didn't seem to affect anything but his own brain function. If so, was he a malevolent first-stage beta? A proto-gamma?

Get everyone home first. Theorize then. Get them home safe.

Reyes climbed the back stairs two at a time. Brady and Miner couldn't have gotten past him. But wherever they were, he could at least check on Chaz.

The door of the big front room was closed and locked. Reyes pressed his ear to it--nothing. He knocked. No reply.

"Chaz?" he called, and didn't have breath for more, because the gallop of his heartbeat crowded and compressed his lungs. No reply.

A side kick by the latch ripped the bolt out of the old wood frame and shot pain through Reyes's knee and hip. He staggered into the room.

Chaz's laptop was open on one bed, the screensaver crawling across the flat panel. There was no one to see it but Reyes.

Lau slammed into the room, weapon at low ready, and Reyes's heart nearly left his chest. Her vigilant scan ended at Reyes, and her eyes widened when she realized he was the only one there. "Oh, god."

"We'll find them," Reyes croaked.

Lau holstered her pistol and grabbed her phone from her pocket, thumbed keys. "Voicemail. One from each of them."

As she listened to her messages, Reyes clung to the back of one of the upholstered chairs and tried to breathe deep and slow. He wasn't going to lose an agent on a God-damned college campus.

"Students United in Christ House," Lau said, and grabbed the campus map.

"I know where it is," Reyes told her. Why did he remember that bit of the map? "Let's go."

*

The kids on the grass across the drive from the Christian house moved like birds in a cornfield, assembling to migrate. Clumps of them burst into motion for no apparent reason and settled; others paced back and forth, see and be seen. Lessing couldn't tell yet if they had leaders. They hadn't reached whatever critical mass was, but people kept appearing, singly, in couples, by handfuls.

Migratory birds ought to be a peaceful image. But Lessing remembered the dry cornfields of her childhood, and the sense the birds gave her, of gathering power waiting for a signal.

She popped the snap on her radio holster and thumbed "talk." "Unit one to unit four, over."

"This is unit four," JoWo acknowledged.

"JoWo, get the bullhorn from the equipment locker. And you'll find a blue cardboard box in the back of the uniform closet--get that, too, and bring 'em to the back door of the SUC house." No one called it the Suck House in her hearing; right now the thought couldn't make even her inner twelve-year-old snicker. "Don't slow up for anything, hear me? I don't care if you see somebody mugging the dean for beer money. Don't stop for anything. Unit one out."

Students United in Christ had rented a house that once belonged to a sorority. It was a two-story white colonial with a broad front porch and a balcony on the second floor. The balcony rail used to display the sorority's homecoming banners and welcoming messages to pledges. Now it wore a banner that read "JESUS IS LORD." The sorority flower borders were draggled now; the Christians weren't much for gardening.

Lessing had never seen the big square house as fortress-like before. Besieged, it had a new face. How did it look to the gathering crowd across the street?

A figure plunged under a low pine bough at the edge of the yard and hurtled toward her. She turned, prepared to block him. It was the young FBI agent, Villette, thin as a bundle of sticks brought to life. He staggered to a graceless halt. "Two of my team are on the way," he panted without preamble. "So is Tim Miner. He's... I'm sorry. He's the--the one who's behind the trouble."

Lessing wanted to ask why--why Villette thought so, why Tim would do that, why she was standing here when Agent Reyes had nailed it: catching the bad guy didn't always solve the problem.

Tim was her right hand. She could count on him. Hadn't Tim understood that?

A chant began across the street. As she'd come to expect from the student body of Sullivan, it was unreasonably clever. "*Jesus loves you, maybe so / But SUC has got to go!*" Among the shouters she saw a tall, earnest bearded kid who worked at the copy service. A brown-haired sophomore who promised to be a star in Sullivan women's soccer. A woman with bead-studded braids who led a moon circle in the fourth floor Kolb lounge once a month.

They wouldn't hurt anyone. But caught up in fear and righteous rage, they weren't them anymore.

"Did Tim do this?" she murmured, nodding toward the growing crowd, the raised voices.

Villette's mouth twisted. "Kind of. He provided the opportunity. They didn't have to take him up on it."

She eyed his profile. Villette seemed to take this personally, and that was another thing she wanted the "why" of. "We can hope they take it out in yelling and banners and a petition to the Dean."

"Take your god and go!" screamed a big, heavy-set guy with long pale hair. Others in the crowd picked it up. "*Take your god and go!"* A marching rhythm. A dozen students stepped forward into the street.

Twenty feet away, at the Students United in Christ house, the porch light snapped on. A blond kid stepped out the front door.

"Oh, *fuck*, no," Lessing breathed, and took three running steps out of the trees toward the porch.

The first rock hit the porch steps. The second one broke a window. The third hit Lessing above the ear.

Absurd, that she knew how many steps, that she knew it was a rock, but she wasn't sure how she ended up on her knees in the foundation plantings. Why was that?

*

If they tried to approach the house from the front, they'd get mugged. Brady knew he made a hell of a target in a crowd. And Miner might get away from him.

Miner was not getting away. Whatever they lost here, to this case, it wouldn't be the UNSUB. Anomaloid or not, Miner fulfilled too many requirements for the Unknown Subject tormenting the campus. And he'd denied knowing Fuller. His easygoing front might be just that, a front. Or it might be an effect of his manifestation.

They would bring in the bad guy. Bile scorched the back of Brady's throat, and he swallowed hard. They would bring in whoever they had to.

Find Chaz. Worry about it then.

Miner led Brady across a street, through the backyards of three other campus houses. Frat houses? Women's studies? In the dark, in haste, they were a jumble of grass, back doors, a confusion of cooking, compost, woodsmoke smells. Sullivan College had seemed like such a pretty place.

Ahead of them, glass broke. The animal voice of a mob growled and yipped.

Brady could see the street in front of the house when he broke through the yard's border of trees. Students eddied onto the pavement, edging their way forward. They weren't soldiers; they didn't charge. They were more like a dog pack, working up their courage in darts forward, small retreats. The motion gradually shifted the whole pack closer.

Miner stopped at the edge of the trees, captured by the chaos in the street. He took a step, two, toward the crowd. His eyes and mouth were round, his face flushed even in the spill of the street light. Brady grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the building.

The back of the Christians' house was dark, but Brady saw a motion in the shrubbery at the corner. He squinted. A woman, a tall woman, limp and being dragged. The one doing the dragging was taller still and thin as a starved hound.

"Chaz," Brady said, and drew the Glock. "Put her down."

Chaz's head snapped up. The woman was Ingrid Lessing. She wasn't unconscious, but there was blood running over her ear and down her jaw, and when Chaz let go, she stayed half-lying on the grass.

Miner's head swiveled, toward the commotion at the front of the house, then to the tableau of Brady, Chaz, and...Brady had to think of her as Chaz's prey, even though it made his guts feel as if they were turning to water. Lessing, injured from a blow. Miner hovered, shivered visibly.

"Brady..." Chaz said, then apparently ran out of things to say. He stood half-erect where he'd let go of Lessing; Lessing crawled away, toward the back porch.

If Miner bolted for the front of the house, Brady would have to go after him, and he'd lose Chaz. That might be better. Someone else, some stranger, could be the one to stop Chaz.

Except it was the team's job. The team could minimize the collateral damage.

The team could be just *and* merciful.

"He's dangerous." Miner was hoarse with their panting run, with the effect of other people's adrenaline. "That's what Agent Reyes's note meant. 'Stay away from Villette.'"

Chaz's head swung around so fast that Miner took a step back, and Brady nearly touched the trigger. "Reyes said..." Chaz repeated, and stopped. He gazed from Miner to Brady, and Brady saw when he realized the scene was real: the Glock, the tension, Lessing crawling and stumbling away.

Miner watched them, his mouth half-open. He no longer looked like a steady, easygoing man. This had to be too damned good for him, didn't it? Fear and grief and anger, confusion and...whatever the anomaly might be pumping through Chaz. If Brady had to fire, the second goddamn bullet was going between Miner's eyes.

"If you let him get away," Miner warned, "they'll say you couldn’t do it."

"Brady?" Chaz's voice shook, unashamed. His hands hovered at his sides, in sight. "Miner's... He's the gamma."

"I know." Brady's voice sounded insanely calm in his own ears. Yes, Miner was the gamma. Brady trusted Chaz to know it, to tell him the truth.

About Miner.

Brady watched the front sight of the Glock. In his peripheral vision, he could see Miner, his feet nailed to the dirt, unable to look away. But the front sight lined up with Chaz's long nose, the top edge even with Chaz's eyebrows. Hazel eye on one side, brown eye on the other.

Sheepdog eyes. Across the table on the plane. Across the bullpen. Looking innocent over stupid April Fool's jokes.

No amount of past had made a difference when it was Andre, whom he'd loved.

"Use two fingers," Brady ordered, loud, but no louder than he had to be. "Take your weapon out of your holster and put it on the ground."

"I won't shoot you," Chaz said, his voice breaking in a messy train wreck of amusement and shock. "I couldn't hit you anyway."

"*Do it.*"

Chaz opened his hand wide, pried his pistol out with thumb and forefinger, and dropped it on the side of him away from Miner. That was a small relief: whatever else happened, Chaz didn't trust Miner.

"Tim," Chaz said suddenly. "This isn't who you are. You're a good person. I've read the reports."

Miner squinted at Chaz, as if he were an animal who'd burst into song.

"They did the CAT scans, the MRIs. The damage to your limbic system was too extensive. And nobody can live without emotions--remembering what it felt like to be whole, to be happy, excited. Nobody could expect that."

"I used to be a Packers fan," Miner said.

For a second it made no sense. Then Brady remembered what it meant: in front of the TV with friends, yelling for a touchdown, bellowing at the ref.

"You lost everything. You had to find something else," Chaz said, nodding. "I know." His eyes, wide and empty under the collapsed fronds of his hair, met Brady's. "I have, too."

At the front of the house, more glass broke. A cheer echoed off the surrounding houses.

"And all these kids who have so much?" Chaz rattled on. "They could spare a little for you. They'd never miss it."

Brady's palms were wet, slicking his two-handed grip. "Both of you, lie down on the ground and put your hands behind your head." He had to project over the sound of the commotion in the street.

Lessing was out of sight. Had she made it to safety? Which was the more immediate threat, the mob or the anomaly?

"You're not safe," Miner said. "He'll use me to distract you. He's too smart for you."

"Brady," said Chaz, his voice pitched only a little too high, "there's a whole lot of angry people out there who want to hurt someone."

Breathe in. Breathe out. It didn't keep his stomach from trying to climb up his esophagus. "I'm hoping somebody else can deal with the normal people. I'm the one trained to deal with gammas."

Chaz frowned (his eyebrows met under the front sight, and Brady wondered why his hands weren't shaking), and his mouth opened. And closed, and opened again. "That's what this is."

"That's what this is."

"I'm not. I...I haven't. I'm okay." Chaz's voice rose higher still. He hadn't really understood it before. Now he knew if Brady had to, he'd fire. "I'm not going to kill you," Chaz said, tight-throated and unsteady, struggling to be heard over the crowd, "but Reyes might."

"You heard Miner. The warning was from Reyes."

Chaz closed his eyes tight, until the crows' feet radiated out from the corners where age hadn't put them yet. "I've had your *back*, man."

"I've had yours." Brady's heart hammered; he couldn't swallow. It was worse than Andre. With Andre, at least he hadn't known what was going on. "I owe you the choice. Lie down and put your hands behind your head, or come at me."

Idlewood, or a bullet. Fuck if he knew which he'd take, if he were Chaz.

Chaz wavered on his feet, his head swinging slowly back and forth like a stunned horse. Brady breathed in, laid the first joint of his finger on the trigger, began the exhale that steadied his hand and focused his brain. The sound of the shot was going to startle the mob.

"Agent Brady! *Stand down!*"

Reyes. Reyes was running toward him across the grass--Jesus, Hafidha was right, he had a goddamn fucking *knack* for putting himself in the way of an accidental shot--and Lau was right behind him.

"Your message," Brady shouted for the back row, over the crowd scene. He held onto the calm of the approaching shot.

"Was a ruse. It was meant to lure Miner. It wasn't true."

Miner looked from Reyes, to Brady with the Glock still raised, to Chaz staring like a charmed cobra down Brady's gun barrel. At the front of the house a girl's scream rose above muddled shouts, incongruously: "*Christ-killers!*" Maybe it was the girl who'd passed out flyers in her pink blouse and smiled kindly at all the sinners. So many ways to lie.

For an instant, Miner stared hungrily toward the house. He blinked, took a step backward, two, then spun and lunged--

But Lau's weight hit him at the hips like a cannonball. Miner went hard and face-first into the grass. Lau made several sharp, forceful motions that Brady couldn't track, and Miner lay still under her, groaning faintly. A flash of metal as she yanked the cuffs out of her back pocket.

Now Brady's hands shook. His sight picture wobbled, or maybe it was Chaz who did that. Brady registered his finger along the barrel and let his arms fall. He had to use both hands to get the Glock in the holster, he shook so badly.

Chaz staggered, tipped sideways, and ended up cross-legged on the lawn, his face in his hands.

Compared to the sound of a car blowing up, the boom was nothing much, though Brady felt it in his chest like a bass drum. Boom, and a screech, and the yard glowed like day under a red sun. Boom, screech, a yellow day this time.

Rockets. *Fireworks.*

"They're legal to buy in Wisconsin," Lau said, breathless and bemused. She'd put plastic zip cuffs around Miner's ankles; as Brady watched, she jerked them up snug.

Lessing's voice, immense and tinny with amplification, sounded from the front of the house. "The man who planted the bomb in Omar Fuller's car is under arrest and in the custody of the FBI. He's been implicated in the other violence and property crime on campus as well. He is not a student or a resident of this house."

"She's on the front balcony." Reyes sounded as if he barely had the strength to speak, but he was steady on his feet. "When we got here, Womerik was

lighting the fuses, and Lessing was running into the house with the bullhorn."

There was near silence on the other side of the house and in the street. This was the payoff for the way Lessing ran her department. When she spoke, the mob listened to her.

The whine of the bullhorn came again. "Fuller is alive and in intensive care. Please go back to your dorms. We'll provide verifiable information as we get it, through the radio station and on the campus paper's website. If you still have questions, you're welcome to come to the campus security office and ask for Officer Lessing, or anyone else on duty. We'll answer anything we can, and anything we can't we'll tell you why."

Four Avon police officers and a pair of black-and-whites were parked in back of the house. Someone must have convinced them Miner was more dangerous than he looked; they read him his rights as he lay on his belly in the grass, covered by the scattergun. Lau was standing next to Brady, an arm around his waist. He seemed to have missed when it happened. "Danny. Come sit down, okay? Let me get you some water."

"Chaz."

"Let Reyes deal with Chaz." Her voice was tight, and he could hear her teeth snap together at the end of the sentence. "Maybe he'll be good at it and surprise us all."

Brady swiveled his head and stared down at her. Her lips were pressed closed. He followed the line of her gaze to the side of the house. Chaz stood, arms crossed tight over his stomach, his head tilted a little forward, looking at nothing. Brady had seen autistic kids stand that way for hours.

Reyes stood at Chaz's side, murmuring something, not touching him. Brady knew Reyes was small. But next to the cold, slender pillar of Chaz, Reyes stood with his shoulders bent forward, his head thrust out and up, trying to see into Chaz's eyes, and he looked tiny, and old, and helpless. At last Reyes raised a hand to touch Chaz's elbow. Chaz barely moved, but somehow, when Reyes's hand came down, Chaz's elbow wasn't there.

Brady found he couldn't feel sorry for Reyes at all.

The big security guard, Joe Womerik, sauntered up to them from the far corner of the house's back yard. He carried a blue cardboard box under one arm, and wore a grin like a smug steer. "We confiscated 'em last summer. I couldn't figure out why the hell she'd keep 'em around in the office like that." Womerik opened the top flap to reveal three fat cardboard cylinders mounted on wooden stalks and printed with stars and spangles and words Brady couldn't read in the shadow of the box.

"Because you never know when you're going to have to get someone's attention," Lau said. Her voice climbed up to the last word, then broke, but not from laughter.

*

Sullivan College served breakfast to the team in the Founder's Dining Room, where neither the food nor the ambiance was likely to remind anyone of a college cafeteria.

None of them ate much.

Tamara Belker, Reyes reflected, bore a distressing resemblance to himself. She thanked him for solving their problem, and for keeping it out of the official public eye as much as possible. She was gracious and positive. Reyes was pretty sure it was an exquisite shell over a seething filling of can't-wait-to-see-the-last-of-you.

Ingrid Lessing had even more reason to want to see Reyes and his team out the door and gone. But she met Reyes in the parking lot behind Voegle, as he carried his bag to the rented sedan.

"Thank you," she said.

"That's good of you."

Lessing snorted. "Tim wasn't your fault." Some of the color left her face, and her eyes closed. "I trusted him like I trust myself. I bragged about it, how carefully I screen my people. And I hired the goddamn wolf and gave him a sheep disguise to wear."

Reyes bit his lip. He could tell her that Tim Miner wasn't anyone's fault, any more than an earthquake or a harvest wiped out by disease. But he wasn't really sure, was he? Even if he were allowed to speak, what could he say?

According to hospital records in Milwaukee, the infection that damaged Miner's limbic system was probably a rare form of meningitis. It worked slowly, but the neurologists could do nothing to stop its progress. Miner's corporate employer, besieged with complaints that Miner was "creepy" in his lack of emotional response, laid him off.

At his last company physical a little over a year ago, he weighed 223 pounds. On the application he filled out for Lessing, he gave his weight as 150.

We hurt people, and hurt them, and hurt them, until they break. Sometimes they break like that.

Chaz came down the back stairs with his go bag over his shoulder. He saw Reyes just outside the doorway and stopped. Not hesitating; just waiting his turn, as if Reyes were a stranger in line at the bank.

Reyes stepped aside, and Chaz crossed the asphalt to the car.

Lessing watched him go, turned to Reyes, and canted her eyebrows.

"It'll get worked out," Reyes said, because polite fictions were all he had left.

He should conserve them. He'd need every one of them for the trip home.

*

Esther Falkner knocked on the semi-glossy walnut door with its knife-edge nameplate and brushed-steel hardware. The interview she was about to have could be done on the phone. But the symbolism, of having to leave her territory and march into Victor Celentano's, to stand before his desk as any of her reports might have to stand at hers, wasn't lost on her.

"Come in," Celentano called. He always sounded like the aftermath of a coughing fit, his voice rough and tight and never carrying as far as it ought to.

She stepped in and closed the door behind her.

The Behavioral Analysis Unit was a stronghold of science in the service of order. That, and the BAU's glamor-unit status, was the message of Celentano's office. Pearly green-gray walls, floor-to-ceiling windows, shining dark walnut desk and shelves, recessed lights and brushed-chrome

wall sconces. Falkner thought about the Anomalous Crimes Task Force's scramble of stray furniture and crowded quarters, and kept her face blank.

"Agent Falkner. Have a seat, please."

Celentano was a larger, pale version of Stephen Reyes in so many ways. His taste in suits wasn't quite as good, but he took his place as a symbol of the Bureau seriously. His sandy hair was thinning and retreating on top, and his jaw was softer than it had been a year ago. He had gray eyes with heavy lids. Falkner wondered if some people mistook him for sleepy.

"Yes, sir." She sat, with grace and no lowering of her guard.

"Explain to me why I heard about Agent Reyes's mishandling of the business in Wisconsin from Agent Lau and not from you."

Celentano's tone was pleasantly social. If she hadn't been paying attention, she might not have realized he'd opened fire. But was there anyone who wandered inattentive into Celentano's sights?

They exchanged stone faces. Falkner breathed slowly, from the belly, twice, before she said, "I thought you encouraged Lau to help keep Reyes in check."

"She diverts the media when Reyes would like to call them in and give a press conference, complete with PowerPoint presentation. This was a little different."

Of course it was. What Reyes had done to Brady was only slightly less abominable than what he'd done to Chaz. If Lau would stand for either offense, she wouldn't be the person Falkner thought she was. "Do you think I've failed to do my duty?"

Celentano leaned back in his chair. "I think you failed to report a serious abuse of authority by a senior agent. Are you protecting Agent Reyes?"

Falkner waited long enough to make him focus on her, impatient. At last she said, "I'm protecting my team."

"This seems like a strange way to do it."

"The identity of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force is bound up with Stephen Reyes's, and vice versa. It's a lousy situation, and it's lousy because of times like this. If the unit didn't identify with Reyes, they'd be fine right now.

Instead..." She considered possible descriptions of the state of things. The fault lines: Brady on one side, Chaz on the other, Lau supporting Brady and Hafidha and Worth circling around Chaz. Todd moving warily from camp to camp like a herald with a flag of truce. And Reyes in splendid isolation, his orders obeyed and his wishes ignored. She settled on, "Morale is at an all-time low."

"Your agents identify with Reyes in spite of what he did?"

Falkner snorted, an undignified sound. "They hate his guts. But the unit's still his, and they're still the unit's. And they know he thought it was a risk worth taking, and that he didn't take it lightly. As bad as things turned out, it still worked. We took Miner into custody alive. Omar Fuller, the young man whose car was bombed, is recovering." Though the team couldn't take credit for that one, it was a mark in the plus column on the PR scorecard.

Celentano rested one elbow on his stomach and wedged his chin in the arch between his thumb and forefinger. Like a rifle rest, it allowed him a stable sight picture. Finally he blinked. "What do you advise?"

"Let him try to win them back."

It was Celentano's turn to snort.

"If you don't, my team won't see this as Reyes's failure. It'll be theirs. Ours. You'll lose them, Vic. And I'm convinced the Bureau can't afford that."

Celentano swiveled his chair to stare out the long window. "All right," he said at last. "Reyes knows what his unpaid leave is for. I'll hold off on any other disciplinary action." He raised his head. "But any more shit, and I *will* pull the plug on him."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Falkner stood. Then she remembered she, too, had a question that needed answering. "Why did you send us to Wisconsin? Why not send a team of your people?"

Celentano's eyebrows went up. "Your team *are* my people, Agent Falkner."

Yes, they were. Not wildcat spook-chasing vigilantes, but members of the BAU, with a place in the hierarchy. It was the only reason they were allowed to exist.

"And I sent the ACTF because I thought they were the best agents for the job," Celentano finished. He looked into her face, impatient. Time's up. There's work to do.

Falkner left, and was careful to close the door quietly behind her.

She walked slowly Down the Hall to Shadow Unit, listening to her steps echo back at her from the hard-finished walls. She'd bargained for Stephen Reyes's professional life, and the life of her team, and won.

She was still not sure she'd done the right thing.

Tactics

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., October 2008

Victor Celentano kept his office on the cold side. Reyes had girded himself before this interview, donning a wool suit and an undershirt so he could sit in comfort, rather than hunching against the chill while he languished in the winter-white chair that fronted Celentano's desk. Celentano let him linger there anyway, Reyes watching while the BAU Unit Chief sorted paperwork, frowning.

Tactics. Social engineering.

Reyes was being encouraged to think upon his sins.

Celentano finally looked up. His pale skin looked powdery with exhaustion. Their eyes met. Reyes made sure he glanced down first.

"Do you understand why you were disciplined?" Celentano had a habitual-smoker's rasp, though to Reyes's knowledge he'd never used tobacco. His teeth and fingers were devoid of stains.

"Because I fucked the dog," Reyes said, plainly. "By rights, I should be sending out resumes right about now." *You are a just and loving God*, he projected, and hoped that Celentano believed he meant it.

Celentano leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled. "If I bring you back to work, are you capable of doing your job?"

Am I? Reyes looked down at his hands, the cuticles rough, the pale nail-beds. "To the best of my ability, Victor. I have... I am reconsidering my management style."

Celentano huffed like a steer, but the barrier of his arms came down. He shoved his keyboard out of the way irritably so he could drape his wrists across the blotter. "Consider the riot act read into the record. Now go back to work."

"There's something I need to discuss with you."

"A transfer?" Oh, he could be arch when he wanted. Arch--even cutting--but Celentano had enough charisma that it was funny even though it stung.

Reyes smiled, in spite of himself. "Outreach--"

"No."

"Victor. There are people--not just gammas, but betas--out there who may be *dying*--starving to death, undiagnosed, the way Gates and Villette almost did--because nobody knows what the hell is wrong with them. There are people who may be on the verge of converting, scared and confused. Maybe gammas don't happen overnight. Maybe we can be proactive rather than simply reactive. We're saving about one in twelve, now. We could do better. We could get there before civilians and law enforcement get killed, or wind up killing to stop people who are *sick*."

"Law enforcement," Celentano said, "is a reactive field. You know as well as I do that part of the Bureau's mission has been to change that." Another man's voice might have gotten tinny and sharp with stress. Celentano's dropped a little. In the book-lined office, it did not echo.

Reyes nodded. "That's why I'm bringing this to you. Those people are not just potential research subjects that we can't use because we don't know about them. They're also human beings. I believe we can get to some of them in time. Save them. Identify them and get them help. We're having some success with the cognitive model, with treating it as a compulsion. There is hope."

He knew what the answer was going to be in advance, but he had to try.

Celentano would not have gotten where he was if he simply reacted without considering. This time, he considered for a full seventy-five seconds, timing by the clock on the wall. At last he sighed, laid his hands flat on his blotter, and said, "I'm *on your side*, Stephen. You know how much it costs to keep seven field agents on semi-detached duty in a task force that doesn't exist. But have you considered how much Idlewood costs? Doctor Baylor? Doctor Ramachandran? Doctor Allison? The retainers and clearances for Doctor Beale, Doctor Frost, Doctor Srinivasan, and associated consultants? The people who hold those purse strings are adamant that public knowledge of the anomaly--beyond the usual internet cranks--would cause panic and possibly a civil threat. They're worried about *lynchings*."

Reyes shook his head, not a denial but a disagreement. Across the width of the desk and an expanse of floor, Celentano's long straight fingers made a

gesture eloquent of helplessness, his palms turning over and sweeping wide.

He sighed and finished, "My hands--are tied."

When those hands landed on the desk, palms down, side by side, Reyes nodded. The interview was over. He stood, knee creaking protest, and felt his shoes sink into the carpet pad. "You'll keep pushing?"

"When I can," Celentano said. "There's a limit to how much I can 'push' the Justice Department. Go back to your desk, Stephen. There's a pile of case jackets on it."

Lynch

Arlington, VA, October 22, 2008, 3:27 AM

All he knows about the room is that it's cold, and mostly dark. There's a light over his head, like in old movies when the police interrogate someone. This light isn't as bright, and it's higher up, more like a spotlight. He wishes it were like the movie ones. If it were closer, it would be warm.

It makes a puddle of light on the floor around him. Maybe it would shine on things close to him, but there isn't anything close to him. That's good, right? There's worse things than being alone.

If he could get out of the puddle of light, his eyes might adjust. He could see the room, find the walls, maybe figure out where he is. Find a door, find a window.

His hands and feet are numb, though. He's not sure they'd work. It must be from the ropes, because he can still feel *those.* Pretty soon his butt will be numb, too. Damned hard chair.

A voice comes out of the dark to his right, a familiar voice. He whips his head around so fast the pain goes through his skull like a bullet and makes him want to puke.

"I bet you expect me to clean up after you," she says. "Well, fuck that. You can take care of yourself or you can go to school smelling like piss. There's free will, you know. It's a free fucking country. Take a little goddamn responsibility."

He was right about the light. He can see her, just enough to recognize the narrow lips with the sunburst of smoker's wrinkles, the deep-cut lines between the corners of her mouth and the triangle of her short nose, the narrowed eyes with a smear of blue shadow on each lid. Her small, hard hands with their painted nails move restlessly through the space between her chin and her waist, as if hoping to find a cigarette there. He can smell old tobacco smoke and the sour-milk odor of her sweat.

She's dead, and in hell, probably, however much he wanted to love her and be loved back. Is that where he is?

They wouldn't need ropes in hell, would they?

She's gone. Did she step back into the dark? Did he imagine her? How could he not have seen where she went? Now that she's gone he has room in his head to be scared. His heart is kicking at his chest.

A shoe scrapes the floor on his left; something moves in the dark.

"Please. Please, where--"

"Not a sound! Do you hear me?" The crack of the ruler against wood makes him flinch. It always came before the sound of it on skin.

The source of the voice moves closer, and the light assembles him out of parts. He's like a bodiless head, the tight white collar a socket into which his short neck fits. His heavy gray jowls droop over the cloth. His black suit and shirt are invisible.

"Christ told us to pray without display. God wants to listen to your hearts, not your tongues. Those you dirty every day with blasphemy and foul language and subjects unfit for His creation. Do you think any word that comes out of your sullied mouths goes to His ear?" Spittle flies as he speaks. He beat a boy who'd called him "Father Firehose," and that night the boy had peed blood and cried because he thought he was dying and was afraid to ask to confess his sins.

That was me, he realizes. *Why had I thought it was someone else? How did I forget?*

But it isn't him crying now. It's a woman, a girl. She's somewhere in front of him in the darkness. He sees what might be pale hair on a head shaking with racked breathing and fear.

No, he thinks. *Not you.*

"I didn't. I did not!" He knows what she's answering. "I didn't say that, and I didn't want you to, not ever!" She stops speaking for exactly long enough to accommodate the words he replied. When she reaches the edge of the light, he can see her tangled white-blonde hair fallen across her face.

What hides her features, though, is her hands. They fascinate him now as they did then. Little-girl hands decked with cheap rings from Hot Topic and Claire's. Baby-blue rhinestones glinting on a fist wrapped around a yellow

number two pencil as it filled in ovals on a test paper. He wants to say her name. His voice is frozen with terror and lust.

She lifts her head. Her eyes are red and swollen. Now he can see the blood on her upper lip, smeared on her mouth and down her chin. He licks his own lips, but they're dry and tasteless. The bruise on her left cheek is already dark. "The hell I will. My mom will tell Sorensen. I hope you go to jail and I hope they fuck you in the *ass*!"

She's too loud. Someone will hear her. If she'll just shut up and give him time to think--

But she didn't.

So of course he knows she's not here, either. And like the others, she's vanished somehow without him noticing. Ghosts. But ghosts couldn't have hit him, tied him up. There's someone here.

"Please. Whoever's out there... My name is Joshua. Josh. I'm a junior high teacher--"

"If that's supposed to make me like you, let me just say you are *way* off the right road."

That voice he's never heard before. It's male, light, unemphatic. Not frightening at all, except for the dark and the ropes. "Who are you?" He makes a demand of it.

"Just a mirror." The figure who comes into the light this time is a stranger. Tall and gaunt, brown hair falling over a brown forehead and a long, sharp nose poking out from under it, wide mouth relaxed and a little lopsided. As if in embarrassment. As if maybe this would turn out to be a mistake, a joke. The stranger may be his own age, not even thirty yet. His right hand hides in a trouser pocket; the left hangs at his thigh and in darkness.

"I...have a wife. Marcie. I married my college sweetheart."

The stranger frowns, rolls his eyes, shakes his head. "Getting colder."

"What do you want?" In spite of the chill, he can feel the sweat under his arms, down his back, in the hair of his chest. He can smell his own stink.

"Not really your problem," the stranger says kindly. When he talks, his front teeth show, one overlapping the other a little. "What you want, there's the

rub." Three casual steps put the stranger behind his right shoulder. "Like Monica Fiore."

His stomach churns. This is not a joke, or a mistake. "I didn't mean to--"

"Right now you don't. But you will. Because you can't stop thinking about how right it feels."

"You're nuts. That's not true."

"Josh, of course it's true. I told you. I'm a mirror. I can't show you anything that isn't there."

There's a new voice behind his shoulder. He recognizes it immediately.

It's his own.

It's saying aloud things he would never let onto his tongue, his profaned tongue, because God must never hear those things. His own mouth is closed, but with each breath he makes a grunting, whimpering noise in his throat that he can't quite muffle. Something hot tracks down his cheeks.

"They'll find you eventually," the stranger's voice continues. There's no threat in it. He might be telling him the time. "Probably within the week. They're really good."

"Oh, god. Oh, my god. Please don't leave me here. Please. I'll starve to death."

The stranger snorts. "Do you know how long starvation takes?"

"Listen, I've got money--"

This time the stranger actually laughs. "A junior high teacher?"

"I can get money!"

The stranger pats his shoulder, a feathery double-tap, and he jerks aside. "They've found her body. They're looking for you. It's either them or me, and in a lot of ways, I'm easier. All you have to face is yourself."

The stranger's hands reach down over his head on either side. The wire he holds is a bright arc in the light from above.

The stranger's not going to let him starve. It's almost funny. He'd laugh, but his chest is so tight with fear he can't get a breath.

"This isn't quick," the stranger says. "If you want to pray, there'll be time."

*

You wake sweating, something cutting across your throat. Ligature strangulation. *You never let anything touch your neck anymore. You clutch. Fingernails scrape your skin.* Defensive wounds. *Something catches your fingers and you hook, yank, gasp so loud you almost don't hear the cloth tear as it bites into your shoulders.*

Your t-shirt, twisted by restless sleep.

Just a dream. Not real. Always the same dreams, even though they're all different. Just a case from down the hall.

It wasn't even your dream. Just the nightmare of a monster, reflected in the mirror. If you were the mirror held up to a dying monster, did that mean the death-blow was suicide, too?

Did his last breath fog your surface?

You clutch your knees, rocking. As if there's any kind of comfort that works at times like this.

You need sleep. You crave it. You should get a scrip, but then you'd have to tell someone about the dreams. The dreams that are just dreams. No matter how Pete Pauley's report on Joshua Lynch had ended.

You can't imagine sleeping sound in Idlewood.

Prayer

Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore, MD, October 2008

"Do you believe in prayer, Dr. Villette?"

"Uh..." Chaz had that sensation, so common in conversations with Madeline Frost, that solid ground had just cracked beneath his weight like ice. "I, uh..."

"My mother did," said Frost. "She taught me to pray every night. I stopped when I was a teenager. What's the saying? God helps those who help themselves?"

She turned to face him. "Recently, though, I've found myself wanting to pray again, even though I believe there is nothing that will hear me or care. But I would pray, if it didn't feel like hypocrisy. I would pray that I never develop an anomalous ability. Because I know what would happen."

Even if he could have thought of something to say in response, he didn't think he could have forced any words out. He did manage to raise his eyebrows, inviting her to go on.

"I would be locked in Idlewood before hearsay was even confirmed as fact." Her eyes were very clear in the fluorescent lights, gray and deep with secrets he did not want to know. "And they would *never let me out*."

She had actually taken a step toward him, and he realized suddenly how *short* she was. He always thought of her as being Falkner's height or better, but she was shorter than Lau. Jesus fucking Christ, she was *tiny*.

She tilted her head to meet his eyes; hers were transparent and unflinching. "They would never let me die."

"Madeline," he started, knowing he was going to say something banal and empty, but helpless to stop himself.

She cut him off. "You are lucky, Charles. They like you." She'd pulled back; her face was cold and perfect again, the depths of her eyes hidden. Ten feet tall, as she always was. "Don't waste it."

shadow unit

2.04 "Getaway" - by Emma Bull

"You can never go home again."

--Thomas Wolfe

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Arlington, VA, October, 2008

In the medicine cabinet mirror, a movement behind him.

He slammed sideways, and the shower door boomed under his shoulder. The soap dispenser hit the wall. *Pistol on the dresser, right outside. Too far.* He had the water glass in his hand; not much, but he could throw it and see what happened.

There was nothing to throw it at.

He sucked air into his lungs and felt his heart banging under his ribs. The shaking and weakness weren't just adrenaline reaction; panic had snapped his personal mirror into place and burned glucose he didn't have. *Note to self: Do not disappear before breakfast.*.

Don't disappear by accident. There was a name for creatures that couldn't control their manifestation.

He took down the defense he'd raised, firmly, deliberately. *Sit. Stay.* While he did, another car passed in the street outside, the reflection of its headlights sliding over the bathroom door, simulating motion.

The soap dispenser had cracked open. Liquid soap crept over the bathroom tile like neon-blue mucus. The smell made Chaz want to vomit. Or the adrenaline did, or the combination. He should clean it up. But then he'd miss his train. It was just soap; it wouldn't kill anyone to let it wait.

*

He dressed, dragged his comb through his damp hair, and checked the contents of his backpack before he went to the kitchen. If he waited the

seven minutes it took to do those things, the universe would recognize his self-control. It would see this was important, and he'd be rewarded.

He did it even though he knew the universe didn't recognize much below the mass of planets.

The kitchen range was warped by years of renters who didn't think to level it. The oven door gapped at the top right. It held temperature well enough for this, though.

The hinges screeched when he opened it. The dry warmth on his face reminded him of fall in the desert: ninety degrees. Ideal for growing non-human organisms. He slid the rack out and lifted the crockery bowl and its kitchen-towel cover onto the counter.

He'd salvaged a tablespoon of sourdough starter from the middle of the quiescent gray mass. He'd warmed it, fed it every twelve hours for nearly a week. He understood the needs of an invalid. No playing fast and loose with the therapy.

Please bubble. I promise I'll never neglect you again. He lifted the towel.

But the patient was still dead.

"Sorry, Elmer," he whispered. "You deserved a better dad."

No, he wouldn't tear up over a sourdough starter. Not his fault he'd been too weak to make bread, and too queasy to eat it. It was just a colony of yeast and bacteria. He could buy another.

He left the bowl on the counter. When he got home, he'd throw the body out.

*

Three blocks to the Metro, every day. Every day, he saw the skull under the schoolyard fence.

It was wedged in a low place under the mangled chainlink around the playground, half hidden in the weeds. It was black with age and leaf mold.

The sidewalk smacked the bottom of Chaz's shoe as if it had risen under it. His fingers clenched on the side of his belt pack and found the zipper. He didn't pull it. He forced himself to stare, as he had yesterday and the days before. That was a smear of mud, not an eye socket. That was the seam

between two sewn panels of leather, not a cranial suture. Not a skull. It was a filthy, half-deflated soccer ball in the weeds under a fence.

He should pick it up and throw it away. But there wasn't room to drag it under the wire. Besides, tomorrow when he saw it it would be a soccer ball, stay a soccer ball. It would be proof he'd gotten over this.

Exactly what he'd told himself yesterday morning, frozen on the sidewalk. He made himself take a step, another. Then he was fine.

*

He felt the wind come up from the station tunnel, heard the wheels screech down below. He had thirty seconds before his train left. He slapped his backpack against the SmarTrip target at the entrance gate. Nothing happened.

"Shit," he muttered, yanked the zipper open, and scrabbled inside for the card. He felt commuters lining up behind him like water above a hair-clogged drain. His fingers found the card edge. He hooked it out, but it flipped from his hand and skittered along the concrete.

He slammed his palm down on the target and swore again. There was a transit cop beside him instantly, as if the word "shit" had conjured him.

"Problem here?" the cop warned.

Chaz's hand hurt. Behind him in line, a woman in a navy raincoat leaned away, pretending to ignore him. A blond man in a windbreaker craned his neck to stare over her shoulder at Chaz. A man in a suit met Chaz's eyes, glared, and dropped his gaze to his wristwatch.

He shook his head, retrieved his card, and went to the end of the line. He might as well have cleaned up the soap.

*

He was late already; he might as well bring coffee.

At least he didn't have to wait in line at the deli. A limo driver sat at one of the laminate tables across the room, eating a bagel and reading the *Post*. Two women in their twenties drank iced somethings with whipped cream. Beside the one in the blue sweater, a toddler dozed in a stroller. The woman--the kid's mom?--jiggled the stroller gently with her foot. The other woman

(white blouse and high, sleek ponytail) spoke soft Spanish and outlined the shape of something with her small, plump hands.

A portable TV chattered behind the counter; the images flickered across the glass fronts of the coolers. Chaz caught himself massaging his wrists and jammed both hands in his pockets.

He ordered an Americano for Falkner (apology for being late), a depth charge for Todd (bribe, so he wouldn't speculate about Chaz being late), soy vanilla latté for Lau (who still missed Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf in California), and a double-syrup mocha with three shots for himself. Daphs was off coffee for a week on a dare, and Hafidha brought morning cocoa from home in a Thermos printed with pink skulls.

Reyes, fortunately, made his own tea. And Brady--

I could bring Brady coffee. Just a gesture. One of us should make one. After all, why shouldn't Brady have trusted Reyes? Everyone did, until they learned better.

He opened his mouth to order another depth charge. The words stuck in his throat. He shook his head, and the woman behind the counter turned away.

The buzz-saw inside him slowed. The murmur of women's voices, the familiar hiss and clatter of espresso making and milk steaming--those were comfort sounds. And knowing the team's morning routine reminded him he had a place in it. Things would improve. They wouldn't be the same, but he could make himself safe again, and dampen the wobble of the thing spinning off-center and loose under his skin.

"Villette?" said the woman behind the counter. He nodded, and she handed him a cardboard tray with four go cups.

The scream might have scraped tissue: high-pitched, loud as a shot.

The woman in blue was scolding the toddler. Its face was scarlet, its mouth open to scream again. Chaz was vibrating like an overtightened cable, and there was coffee all over the floor.

The woman behind the counter spoke to him. The woman with the toddler did, too. He thought it was English, but he couldn't understand them. He bolted for the street.

*

Hafidha's monitors were lit. A quick, cautious look into her sanctum showed him the Bureau seal screensaver over and over, with the vintage flying toasters of Hafidha's laptop guarding their flank. Hafidha wasn't there. He slunk through the hallway doors into the bullpen.

Lau jogged toward him between the desks with a fistful of files for Down the Hall. She smiled as she passed, abstracted. Brady was at his desk, on the phone. "It's not going to be a sedan," Chaz heard him say. Brady's eyes tracked toward Chaz, and Chaz looked away toward the kitchenette. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Brady stare out the windows at the end of the bullpen. Todd's desk showed signs of habitation, but no actual Todd.

Daphne frowned at a fan of photos in her hand, then spread them on her desk and leaned in, like a hawk mantling over its kill. He would have sworn he hadn't made noise, but she looked up, blew her bangs out of her eyes, and grinned at him.

He must not look as bad as he felt. Or maybe she couldn't read him as well as he'd thought. That was good. Wasn't it?

Reyes's office was dark. Falkner's door was open; she was in her desk chair, jabbing at her keyboard. (The average life of a keyboard in Falkner's custody was 162 days.) She'd hung up her suit jacket, and her crisp cream-colored blouse glowed under fluorescent light.

Chaz pushed on toward his desk, feeling like spun glass. If he tripped, he'd be splinters all over the room.

He wasn't going to trip. He was used to taking care of himself. He'd gotten a little sloppy about that, leaned a little too much on other people, expected things of them. But he hadn't forgotten how to stay safe. He just had to act on it, was all.

They'd think he'd changed. Well, everyone changed. It was nothing to worry about.

Eddie Cieslewicz's severed hand lay on his desk.

When he opened his eyes there was nothing on his desk, because it was all on the floor. The crash still echoed in his ears. His forearm stung where it had hit the lamp and the phone. In the mess he couldn't pick out what cluster of objects had looked like a palm and fingers.

He lifted his head. Brady held the receiver forgotten over the cradle of the phone. Daphne leaned across her desk, braced straight-armed on one hand, the other half-raised toward Chaz. Todd stood at the entrance to the kitchenette, coffee dripping down the side of his cup and over his fingers. Lau and Hafidha were frozen at the doors to the hall. Five motionless bodies, faces shocked blank. *It's like a game of Statues. Or a photo of bystanders at a car wreck.*

Falkner stood framed in her office doorway. Her face rarely gave anything away, but Chaz thought there was a lot going on behind her not-expression.

He bent, retrieved the phone, and put it back on the desk. *Think of an explanation. Figure out a way through the rest of the day, so you don't notice they're looking at you sideways.* At least he hadn't raised the mirror.

He reached for the lamp. In the debris he spotted his stapler and picked that up instead.

5.35 ounces, with staples.

He wasn't human. No point even in pretending. And no one would care, if all he could do was weigh things with his brain. How much damage could he do with that, if he went off the rails?

If they knew about the mirror, they would care.

He looked again at the team, one by one. He didn't let himself linger on Hafidha or Daphne, because they might unfreeze, and he wanted to be done by the time they thought to move.

He rose and walked the aisle to Falkner's office. Falkner stepped aside to let him pass in.

*

Falkner felt the door latch snick home and pressed her palm to the wood a second longer than necessary. She could almost feel five pairs of eyes on the other side trying to drill through, hear the five brains pulling up evidence. There'd been an explosion. In the aftermath of an explosion, that's what the team did.

Of course, the explosion might not see it that way.

God damn you, Stephen. No, unfair; this wasn't all of Reyes's making. She'd thought she could hold the pieces of the team together long enough for them to knit again. Lau had known better, when she went to Celentano. Holding them together just made the tension that much worse.

It just made the most fragile pieces crack.

Chaz stood with his back to the desk, arms curled against his chest, staring at the framed dead trees on the wall. He was facing them, anyway. Whatever he was seeing, Falkner doubted it was her Army commission. His shoulders rose and dropped, quick, deep breaths.

He didn't stab me when he had the chance, she told herself. Then, because it was the hard fact, added, *That was then.*

Five highly-trained, vigilant people on the other side of the door would be useless if Chaz wasn't himself. Stupid euphemism. Chaz was himself; it just wasn't the self Falkner had shooed out of the office on Memorial Day weekend. (Every day since, she'd repeated, *You didn't make it happen*.)

No one could pass through that unchanged. They all knew it. *Chaz* knew it. There was no point in pretending otherwise. But he'd pretended just the same.

Falkner sat down at her desk, nudged the keyboard aside, folded her hands, and waited. Seven seconds before Chaz turned.

Because he was mostly bone and ligaments, it was easy to see when his teeth were clenched. His chin rose, his throat worked.

"I quit," he said.

He meant it to shock, and it did. Falkner refused to show it. One-one thousand. Two-one thousand. "Why?"

"*Why?*"

She let exasperation get to her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth. "What did you think I'd say?"

That made him look into her face, instead of just past it. He raised his right shoulder--a flinch-and-roll, as if it ached.

He hadn't considered what she'd say. There was a chance she could talk him out of the corner he'd backed himself into.

Chaz's gaze slipped sideways toward the window. Too good a poker player not to understand his own tells; too human to hide them all. "I can't do the work."

"Bullshit." *Yes, I saw you palm the card*. "You could do the work hanging upside down over the shark tank at Sea World."

Chaz shuffled his arms; now they were right over left over ribcage. His fingers flexed, stretched, like antennae searching the air. They had more expression than his face. It occurred to Falkner that she was seeing the Chaz Reyes had studied but never saw: the teenager who learned to hide in plain sight.

The person Chaz had been before Memorial Day followed impulses and took risks. Now he planned and second-guessed each word and action and everything he heard and saw. Post-traumatic stress disorder could produce changes in personality.

It wasn't the only thing that could.

His voice was dull and flat when he said, "I display abnormal reaction formation, poor impulse control, extreme startle reflex, and inability to respond effectively to negative experiences."

Not an explanation; a diagnosis. Falkner didn't know if Chaz was describing his symptoms or someone else's. It might even be a voice out of his childhood, of someone who'd written notes Reyes had read.

The only thing she was sure of was that it was a wall of Chaz's building, meant to keep out people like her. Somewhere deep in Falkner was the reaction that Brady would have had: something physical, fierce, useless. In Brady the reaction would have more cement and rebar over it than Jimmy Hoffa.

As if it doesn't in me.

Chaz bent his daisy-stem neck and peered at Falkner out the corner of his darker eye. "That's your game face."

"My what?"

He flushed under his fading tan. She allowed herself a breath, because the flat-voiced psychologist of a moment ago would never blush.

"Professional, Federal Bureau of Investigation, hard to read. Lau and Brady call it that."

Tit for tat. That was *her* wall, between her and the things she couldn't afford to take into herself. Whether he knew it or not (and in his current state, Falkner wasn't sure how much of what he knew he was able to use), he'd replied to her assault on his defenses by a poke at hers.

So she leaned forward with her arms crossed on the desktop (though her back pinched ferociously, as if some creature had bitten her and hung there), and gave up as many of those defenses as she could. Too late to come out from behind the desk; Chaz would spot the big gesture and lock up like a bank vault. She made her voice a little more gentle, and put some question into her command. "Tell me what's happening."

It unfroze Chaz's posture, at least. He eased into the spare chair as if he or it might break. He hunched forward, elbows on his knees, his long, knuckly hands kneading the air.

"I don't... I'm a risk in the field. A weakness. I'm jumpy and paranoid and I...I can't sleep. I'm going to shoot the wrong person."

Falkner took a risk and said, "You did a good job in Wisconsin."

He bared his teeth at the floor. It was probably supposed to be a smile. "Reyes kept me in solitary. Kind of limited the damage I could do."

How to tell the difference between over-protection and lack of trust? From this distance, Falkner couldn't. She wondered if even Reyes had been able to. "What kind of damage are you expecting?"

"It's the kind you don't expect that gets you, isn't it?" He lifted his head, met her eyes with a receptive calm that seemed an eerie match for her own. "Maybe you should ask Brady."

No point in leaping to Brady's defense. She'd debriefed the team that went to Wisconsin, together and separately. They all knew sometimes the unforgivable had to be forgiven.

Knowing wasn't doing.

"What happened in Wisconsin had nothing to do with your ability to do the job. You were all making decisions on too little sleep and under too much pressure."

"Brings out the worst in people. And anomaloids."

Anger, resentment, warning--there was so much Falkner could read into those words. What did he want her to hear?

"Look," Chaz said, "I don't trust me, either. The experiment failed, okay? I resign. Otherwise at some point you'll have to call me in and tell me you're firing me for the good of the unit. Or you'll hold off until..." Chaz's hands clenched. His lips compressed again; the muscles around his mouth flexed. *I can't talk about it,* they said. He drew an uneven breath through his nose.

"There's no evidence you'll convert."

"Would we know it if we saw it?" he asked, his voice rising unconsciously in pitch and volume. "Tell me what I'm watching for."

He was right. The signs by which Shadow Unit identified a gamma--sudden extreme weight loss, heavy and frequent eating, unusual capabilities or perceptions--were already evident in a beta. If Chaz converted--if he even developed an external manifestation, as Hafidha had--would any of that change?

"Tell me what you've seen," Falkner said.

Chaz's fingers writhed around each other, and his chin dropped to his chest. *Please, no,* she prayed on a surge of panic. They'd followed so many cases in which stress, injury, and pressure made a monster. *Not this one.*

Tight-voiced, Chaz said, "Nothing."

Only the emergency Falkner had wanted to deal with going into this conversation. Bad enough, but not the worst.

Chaz knew as much about the worst and its signs as anyone on the team. He would have already looked in that mirror. It hadn't shown him his face. If it had, he'd have told Falkner the minute the door closed, because in his way, Chaz was the bravest person Falkner knew.

But Chaz also knew the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. If this was only the crisis Falkner had thought it was, why were they here?

She'd been so sure he was ready to come back to work. Maybe she'd only seen how much he *needed* to, and lied to herself. What the hell kind of behavioral analyst did that?

Chaz's gaze was fixed on the carpet, but he was seeing the inside of his head. First job: get him out of there. "No," Falkner said briskly. "I can't accept your resignation."

Chaz scowled, opened his mouth, reconsidered. "So if I want to get back to Witch Mountain, I'll have to run for it."

"Only if you want me to send out the helicopters." Falkner couldn't lean any farther across the damned desk; if she could have, she would. "Everything you've described is consistent with PTSD. I'd be more worried if you *didn't* show the signs." She let a little exasperation into her voice. "Chaz, you're not *that* special."

His laugh was more like throat-clearing, but it was enough to reassure her.

"Nobody can spend all day, every day, walking into closets full of monsters and not start screaming eventually. We all have coping strategies, but they aren't perfect, and they don't work forever. You know that. That's why we get medical leave and counseling."

Chaz's left hand reached toward his right wrist, changed vector abruptly, and ended by scratching aimlessly up and down his arm. "I did that already."

And whatever he said during his psych eval was sealed by physician-patient privacy. The only part that ought to concern Falkner was that he was cleared to return to duty.

"I can make ongoing counseling a condition of your continued employment."

Chaz's hands stopped moving. He lifted his head. His face was iron, his eyes fixed unblinking on Falkner. "Go ahead. I already quit."

After William Villette, Chaz wasn't going to be scared by anything Falkner could say.

In a course of psychiatric therapy, there came a point where the patient fought back, protected the place where the pain was worst. Instinct was

stronger than the desire to heal. When that happened, the therapist had to be smarter and more determined than the patient.

Chaz had been imprisoned by a delusional sadist who controlled and manipulated his victims by overpowering their thoughts, their emotions, even their sense of right and wrong. He'd been starved, psychologically tortured, and finally damned near flayed. And he'd still managed to walk out of the abattoir.

Finding a therapist smarter and more determined than that might be tricky.

Falkner's throat was full of the sentences it would be wrong to say. *If you quit, the wheels will fall off the team. We'll lose Daphne, and Hafidha, and Brady will close up for good, and I won't be able to caulk the cracks. People will die, and it will happen because you left.* But guilt was the wrong reason. She couldn't even let Chaz get there by himself.

Chaz's hands gripped each other, sudden and angry. "I'm just... We're damming the ocean with a box of toothpicks."

"We find and stop the criminals no one else can--"

The response wasn't so much a shake of Chaz's head as a snap of it, a violent horizontal twitch. He was hidden behind his hair and his lowered eyelids; the tells that Falkner most wanted were blocked by shadow and crossing lines. "We wait for a gamma to hurt enough--*kill* enough--for us to figure him out. Then if we're lucky, we take him alive and make up a good enough story to lock him in the monster zoo for the rest of his life. And we call that winning. How can we afford to *lose*?" When he spoke again his voice was flat, the words like pebbles dropped out of his mouth, one by one. "I can't keep doing this."

"The Green River Killer case made John Douglas melt down like a Hershey bar on a dashboard in July. He took medical leave."

"Douglas had viral encephalitis."

"Be thankful for small favors. Chaz, you don't have to be the invulnerable butt-chinned hero to do this job. Trying to be actually makes it harder. You're allowed to groan when you hurt and limp when you're sore and *get counseling when you need it.* Who are you measuring yourself against?"

Chaz straightened in the chair, stiff and remote again. "The point of me quitting is that you don't have to give me pep talks."

Or ask you personal questions. "I'll put you in for medical leave, effective immediately. Take a few weeks and talk to a therapist before you do anything else. Please?" It had sounded better as an order. The begging just popped out.

Chaz pushed his hair back from his face with the pads of his fingers. "I guess if it's that or the helicopters."

Falkner exhaled.

Chaz unfolded out of the chair and walked to the door as if he were forty pounds heavier and forty years older, and Falkner went with him, because he shouldn't have to open that door and face the others by himself.

But Chaz stopped with his hand on the knob. "Sorry about your back."

Falkner's voice failed her. By the time she recovered, Chaz was down the aisle of the bullpen, and a BAU clerk was at Falkner's door holding out a sheaf of paper and saying something about needing to be signed off on right away.

Who was he measuring himself against, indeed. God strike down Esther Falkner and her damned game face.

*

Out of the corner of his vision Solomon Todd watched Chaz make his measured way down the aisle, eyes on the floor, like a prisoner being moved. Had Falkner *fired* him? No, there were still impossible things, even in this world. Even Reyes wouldn't do it, though Todd was fairly sure the recurring sight of Chaz in the bullpen gave Reyes a case of the Conscience that would make a plague of boils seem like an inconvenience. Reyes might be as lapsed as he liked, but he was still capable of wanting to walk to Santiago on his knees.

Chaz and Lau passed beside Brady's chair. Lau gave him a one-cornered conspiratorial smile. Chaz, fishing in his pocket and pulling out his phone, either didn't see or pretended not to. Once Lau was past, he put the phone away.

Well, Todd thought. That would have been on the list of impossible things.

Daphne Worth was not so easily trifled with. She stood at the corner of Chaz's desk. Chaz's chin came up as he approached, and the muscles of his throat flexed tight. But Worth crouched by the scattered objects that in quieter times lived on Chaz's desk, picked up the lamp, and set it in its accustomed place.

Chaz watched, as if trying to decide among several actions. Todd couldn't imagine what the others were, but the one he settled on seemed pretty good. He squatted, picked up his wireless keyboard, and set it in front of his monitor.

Together they returned order to Chaz's desktop. Chaz worked with brisk precision, as if the surface were a game of Tetris. Worth quickly adapted, simply picking things up off the floor and handing them to him. Chaz never lifted his eyes from the stuff he was shifting and, temporarily, at least, Worth put up with that.

When they finished, she asked, "Go for coffee?"

Chaz raised his eyebrows.

"Okay, I'd drink something else and suffer nobly while *you* drank coffee."

One corner of Chaz's mouth rose, but that lasted barely long enough for a sighting. "No thanks." A sideways glance at Worth. "But thanks. For the help."

She stepped forward and touched her fingers to the desk, as she might touch someone else's arm. "Platypus--"

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

Worth pinched her lips together between her teeth. "Later, maybe." She walked away, toward the kitchenette, which would give Chaz wider margins than if she sat at her desk nearby.

Todd, however, was already at his desk, which butted up to Chaz's. And he already had coffee.

If anyone had suggested one ought not profile one's teammates, the team would have regarded the anyone as if he were speaking Finnish, which Todd was pretty sure no one on the team spoke. It wasn't a skill to be turned on and off, like playing softball. Or maybe it was *just* like that: after enough

practice, if something came hurtling toward you, you put up your glove and caught it.

So it wasn't Todd's fault if he couldn't miss the way Chaz lowered himself into his chair, careful and stiff, or the way he sat at the front edge of the seat as if it might disappear under him. Todd felt the quick snare-drum vibration of Chaz's heel on the leg of his chair, transmitted through the floor.

Chaz's routine since Wisconsin had been to start the day as if he were fleeing persecution. Hurl himself at his desk, drop into his chair, wake his computer before his butt hit the cushion, drag over the nearest case document, and start work. Todd wasn't fool enough to think that was about renewed commitment to the nation's interests.

Insulation, more like. And not just from his coworkers.

Todd took a swallow of coffee as an excuse to raise his head, just enough to see over the privacy barrier between his desk and Chaz's. This was definitely not the post-Wisconsin routine. Chaz perched like a bird poised between feeding and flying away, waiting for an all-clear or an alarm. *Why don't the good guys get mind control powers?* If they did, Todd would plant an irresistible longing for coffee in Chaz's brain. Chaz would go into the kitchenette, pour himself a cup, stand awkwardly with all his angles pointing in unlikely directions. And Worth would open a cautious, stop-and-start dialogue with him.

Or maybe Chaz would take his laptop and coffee and burrow into the safety of Hafidha's shocking-yellow velvet couch. Then Hafidha would pick the necessary story out of him, a few words at a time, about what had gone on in Falkner's office.

Chaz had always had his privacies, his secured areas of intimacy with password-only access, and he was stingy with the code. Daphne Worth and Hafidha Gates had it, whoever else might. But there was secure, and there was immured behind a wall of thorns. Even in fairy tales, the latter was never a good idea. That was why one had magical godparents, after all.

Chaz reached casually behind himself and slid the straps of his leather backpack off his chair. Not new, that pack. But it was a very nice piece of luggage, supple black leather, reinforced seams, and antiqued bronze

hardware. Todd, having seen Chaz's car, wouldn't be surprised if it had cost less than that backpack.

A profiler or a journalist ought to be able to draw some inference from that, but Todd was damned if he could.

Chaz started opening drawers, taking things out, dropping them in the bag. A handful of Clif bars. Two notebooks. Three CDs. His iPod. His fountain pen.

The "Platypus Xing" sign that had appeared over his monitor one April Fool's. The photos push-pinned to the privacy barrier: Chaz belaying for Daphne at the climbing gym. Chaz and Hafidha on the beach in Maui. Hafidha and Daphne clowning on ice skates.

Chaz was removing himself from his desk.

Falkner hadn't fired him. A fired federal employee got official help cleaning out his desk drawers. And Chaz's casual front was calculated: his body was saying, "Nothing to see here, pay no attention."

Hafidha was nowhere in sight. Worth was still in the kitchenette. Brady knew better than to enquire into Chaz's personal life at present. If someone was going to ride to the rescue, it would have to be Todd.

He rolled his chair back, stood, and stretched. If there was one thing journalism taught, it was how to be unashamedly nosy. He pretended to notice for the first time what Chaz was doing, craning his neck for maximum verisimilitude. "Heading out?"

He thought his voice might have provoked the instant of hesitation in Chaz's hand on the pack zipper.

"Mm," Chaz said, and jerked the pull. The zipper closed so quickly it made a single sound rather than the corrugated stutter of tooth on tooth.

"Where to?"

"Vegas," Chaz replied, after a pause that suggested he was considering several possible answers, "None of your business" being one of them.

"Huh." Todd strolled around the side of his desk to lean hipshot on Chaz's. Chaz crouched and slid his go bag from under it. He didn't pick it up, though; that would attract attention. That would be the last step. "Staying long?"

Chaz shot him a look, one with no apparent emotional content. "Not sure." He shrugged the backpack onto one shoulder. Now he would reach for the go bag.

Keep him talking, and hope for a miracle. "Would you mind doing me a favor?"

Chaz turned to him and waited, head a little cocked. A wild critter watching to see which way Todd moved.

"Can you get me a shot glass from Caesar's Palace?" Todd heard the words leave his mouth and wondered where they came from. The operation of his hind brain was as close to a miracle as he could manage on short notice. But when Chaz asked him what the hell for, what was he going to say?

For a heartbeat longer Chaz eyed him. Then he mumbled, "Got it," and the near-nod duck of his chin became the swoop that closed his hand around the strap of his go bag.

All Todd could do was let him go, before the need to escape made Chaz disappear like a Star Trek transporter effect. By the time Todd turned for a last look, there was nothing to see but the hall door closing.

He wasn't looking forward to telling Hafidha.

*

Falkner handed the signed requisitions off to the clerk, looked up, and saw the closing hall door catch the light. Too late. The damage, whatever it was, was done.

"Thank you, Agent Falkner," said the clerk, with a have-a-nice-day smile and a nod, and walked out her door and through the bullpen to the hall. Falkner wondered if this was how anthropologists felt, when other people saw a nice place to picnic and they saw burial mounds.

The Bureau was mostly cops, with good cops' thick skins and distrust of imagination. But the WTF was like a string of racehorses. They didn't run well when they were upset. And what upset one could throw them all off their stride.

Maybe the effect would work in reverse. Maybe if Falkner unlocked her jaw, unclenched her fingers, released the tension in her back that hurt like a massage from burning fingertips, the effect would spread through the team.

And the Messiah would show up five minutes later and give them all dreidls.

PTSD is bad enough, she told herself. *Don't go looking for extra trouble.* But if it was already there, it wasn't extra, was it?

In someone else, Falkner would call it a crisis of faith. Chaz didn't believe in God; but what he did believe in had failed him. She had no idea how to fix that problem.

Maybe it shouldn't be fixed. Chaz had good reason to doubt, after all.

She filed the necessary leave order, making use of the time before Worth or Hafidha--or someone--nerved themselves to ask her obliquely about Chaz's empty chair, and see how much she was prepared to say.

But it was Stephen Reyes who came to her first. He knocked on the doorframe, and she raised her head and nodded. Once he was in, she said, "Yes, you should close the door."

He acknowledged the break in her custom with a grimace and shut it gently behind him. She didn't bother to tell him it was the second time today; he'd figure it out.

To Reyes, she'd already said what she wanted to. Just because she was on fire to say it again, louder, didn't give her the right, or make it any more useful to repeat.

"Where's Chaz? he asked. He didn't sit down. Did he not expect to stay long, or did he think he should wait for an invitation?

"Officially? On medical leave."

He took it with the barest sideways motion of his head. She recognized it as a shrunken version of his reaction to unreliable witnesses, and reminded herself of her resolve not to yell at him. He asked, "Unofficially?"

Chaz had left a weapon in her hand. She used it. "He quit."

Reyes jerked sideways, as if he'd put a foot down on a surface that wouldn't hold him, and drew a short, hard breath through his nose. In an instant he remembered himself, what he knew, what she'd told him. But she took unworthy satisfaction in that splinter of time.

Reyes paced across the room and stopped at the window. He stood with his hands on his hips, his chin thrust forward, as if he meant to intimidate the glass. His thumbs pressed deep creases in the back of his flannel trousers just below his belt. "What happened?"

She considered where to begin. It was a question with many answers, after all.

But he surprised her by dropping his head and shoving his hands in his trouser pockets. "I'm sorry," he said. "That wasn't the note I'd meant to strike." He pivoted on one glossy oxford to face her. He either knew or forgot that he was now backlit. "Can you tell me what prompted him to resign?"

Because Reyes could judge tone (when he wasn't rattled) the way Chaz could estimate distance, his question suggested both that she might not want to tell him, and that Chaz might not have given her enough to go on. A good effort, deserving of a reward.

"He's showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress. He doubts his ability to contribute, so he believes everyone else does, too." She took a long, slow breath. "And if I didn't point out he has trouble trusting himself and the team, I wouldn't be doing my job."

A sharp glance from under his eyebrows. "No, you wouldn't. You don't mention that if I'd done better at *my* job, yours would be easier."

Not yet, she hadn't. "I expect staring down the barrel of Brady's Glock contributed to Chaz's feelings of alienation."

Reyes sighed. It was not the sound of battle being joined. "May I sit?"

"Please," she said, and he settled decorously into the better of the two visitors' chairs.

He rested his elbows on the chair arms and laced his fingers across his stomach. Now she could see his face properly. He might have been staring at the view of nearby rooftops, but his eyes seemed too wide and unfocused. "I walked through the house, after you left in the ambulance."

For the team, "the house" would always be the one in Texas. She nodded. "I read the case report. It had Brady's profile of the scene."

He gave the little smile and exhalation through his nose that irritated her; it was agreement and skepticism and dismissal at once. "He did a good job. But there's no substitute for seeing it yourself."

It was true. No one read a crime scene like Reyes.

"I found granola bar wrappers in the kitchen trash. There was another wrapper open on the counter, with the granola bar broken up small. There was a bucket of fresh water in the kitchen. In the dining room I saw a wet ring on the tiles, the size of the bucket, out of reach of the chain. I didn't see a cup. And the manacles were made to hold the hands in this position." Reyes held his hands out before him, palms toward the floor, and tucked his elbows in until his wrists were only a few inches apart.

Falkner looked at Reyes's neat brown hands and felt her stomach clench. "Chaz couldn't have fed himself. He couldn't have held a cup."

"Villette made Chaz eat from his fingers. He brought the water in his cupped hands, and made him--" Reyes's voice hardened before it broke off like a frozen branch.

There was nothing Falkner could fill that silence with.

For the first time since he sat down, Reyes met her eyes across her desk. "I could see Chaz curled up on the floor at the end of that chain. And I knew what he was thinking. 'I just have to hold on. They'll get to me.'"

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because that was when I stopped being afraid he would convert. I failed to realize that the same evidence, combined with past experience, would have the opposite effect on Brady. I can't plead anything except 'guilty.'"

Falkner wished she had something to fiddle with--a cup of coffee, a pen, her reading glasses. It would be an excuse for silence. Picking something up now would be an admission of weakness. "Have you talked to Chaz since you came back from Wisconsin?"

"He avoided me pretty efficiently in the twenty-four hours between then and my unpaid vacation." Reyes's eyebrows gave a little sardonic twitch. Was that for Chaz, for Celentano, for Reyes himself, or all three?

"You could have called him."

He straightened against the chair back, lifted his head. But he must have reconsidered what he meant to say; he bent forward, forearms crossed on his knees, as if he'd like to clutch them protectively across his chest. "I believed neither of us was ready to revisit the issue. And I thought Chaz might feel...hounded. Was I wrong?"

Stephen Reyes was asking her if he was wrong. He wasn't assuming she'd say "no," either. He deserved her best answer. "I think the worst things hounding Chaz right now are inside him. And he's the one who has to drag them into the light. Until then, all we can do is give him a safe place to do it."

Reyes closed his eyes, drew a breath, and let it out, short and sharp. Falkner hadn't meant it as a dig--it was only the truth--but of course, it would hurt. *You did the worst thing you could have.*

"He's ashamed," she said. Even as she said it, she wondered why she was telling Reyes.

Reyes frowned. "Ashamed?"

"Of what happened to him in Texas. Of the scars."

"He was wounded in the line of duty. And took down the gamma, besides."

"Have you ever been injured that badly?"

He looked ruefully down at his left arm. "Well, if Worth hadn't been there the last time, I'd have been a goner."

"But you didn't stay on the sick list long."

"No," Reyes said after a moment. "Have you?"

It was her can of worms. She might as well open it. "I'd hurt my back, at West Point. I wouldn't admit it." And there was her own ironic snort of amusement, so she supposed she ought not to be annoyed with Reyes's. "Because I was damned if I'd let anyone say I was asking for special treatment."

"That was stupid."

"At that age we're all stupid. Military academies don't make it better. Then in Kuwait... I finished screwing my back during a mission. I was hospitalized

for weeks, and assigned light duty on release." If she hadn't been a girl, she might have got a Purple Heart. It had mattered at the time, some. Now it was just another pebble thrown in the pond.

Reyes's body was relaxed and still, and his expression quietly attentive: interested and not judging. That she knew exactly how the trick was done didn't keep it from working.

"People from my platoon, the major--they came to the hospital and said, 'Good work, Lieutenant. You should be proud.' But I wasn't. I was ashamed. I was less than I'd been, less than everyone I served with." Her hands trembled. She leaned back and clutched the seat of her chair to hide it. "There's two ways to pronounce I-N-V-A-L-I-D."

Reyes turned his gaze to the window again. She counted off two seconds before he pressed his closed right hand hard against his lips. Finally he said, "Thank you. For Chaz's sake, especially."

"We may still lose him."

"We may already have."

Falkner looked out the strip of glass beside her closed door, into the bullpen. Worth was leaning over Lau's shoulder, pointing at something on Lau's desk with the end of her pen. "Let's hope not," she said. "I don't think you, Sol, and I can do this by ourselves."

Act II

His was the only reading light on in the cabin.

The occupied seats (which wasn't all of them; the red eye from Dulles to McCarran rarely filled up, even in the peak season) were tilted back. White pillow corners showed at the edges of headrests. Navy blue blankets trailed over armrests on the aisle.

The book in Chaz's lap--a survey of neuroplasticity for non-neurosurgeons--was one he wanted to read, so he felt guilty whenever he realized his eyes had wandered off the page again. He pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his face.

He'd been fine at first, because he'd had to move quickly from one thing to another. Find a flight, book a seat, pack, leave a note about cat food and a key for the Ngs. All the things normal people did when they went on vacation. It was important to look normal.

Once he got to the airport, the sitting and waiting started. Now there was nothing else, and Chaz was alone with his brain, which wasn't quite plastic enough to stop following old trails that led to places he didn't want to go.

There was no movie on the red eye.

The senior cabin attendant slipped through the curtain from first class. Chaz held up an index finger, raised his eyebrows. She spotted him and smiled. *My name is Darice. On behalf of United Airlines, I'd like to welcome...* Don't call her by name. Normal people wouldn't remember it.

She leaned over the aisle seats in his row. She had chin-length straightened hair, long eyes made longer with eyeliner, and a short, rounded nose and small, full mouth at odds with the artfulness of the first two. Without makeup and with her hair pulled back, Chaz bet she looked about 18. At a volume perfectly calculated to reach him over the engine noise and no more, she murmured, "What can I get you, sir?"

"I'd like a screwdriver, please?"

Darice nodded and padded away toward the galley.

A screwdriver was a nice, healthy way to self-medicate. Increase your intake of vitamin C while traveling. No conclusive research, but Linus Pauling was still Linus Pauling, after all.

And coffee was right out. The last thing he needed was to be more alert.

He was twitchily aware that his gun was checked in his duffle. He should have gone through the Tactics for Flying Armed Training Program when Todd first mentioned it to him. But then, those were the days before the belt pack and the bedside table.

Back then he could leave his weapon in a car glove compartment.

He dropped the tray table, then stared at the bulkhead between coach and business until Darice came back. She set down a peel-top cup of orange

juice, the little bottle of vodka, a plastic cup of ice, two bags of peanuts, and four of pretzels. He looked quickly up.

"I noticed you didn't bring food on board." The line from her chin to her throat was soft, incised with a tiny crease. He couldn't be sure in the dimmed cabin, but it looked as if her right nostril was pierced.

He shrugged and pushed a little smile across his face. "I forgot, at the airport." In fact, he'd stared at the refrigerated ranks of shiny clear-wrapped sandwiches, crayon-green lettuce flattened against uniform bread, an oily smudge of mayo on plastic, and felt his stomach churn.

She tapped the top of the vodka bottle. "If you want another of these, let me know."

"Thank you." Odds were she knew someone with a drinking problem, maybe someone in recovery--not herself, or she wouldn't have offered to make the drink a double. She acknowledged that not everyone was an addict, but she knew what enabling was, and she tried not to do it. So she'd only brought one bottle.

Stop it. There was nothing to keep in practice for. He didn't need to know anything about anyone that they didn't choose to say out loud.

Chaz fumbled bills out of his wallet and handed them to her. She smiled and nodded and went on down the aisle, so he must have kept his thoughts to himself. *Good boy. Stick to normal.* Still, his hands shook as he fished the iPod out of his backpack.

Music and vodka might unwind the taut spring in his head, at least temporarily. He put the earbuds in, thumbed the click wheel, and highlighted a playlist without reading the name. The earbuds murmured to him; like Darice's voice, just loud enough. *"My friend has problems with winter and autumn,"* Amanda Palmer chanted. "Runs in the Family" said the display.

The iPod oracle. Chaz jabbed the click wheel and got Siouxie and the Banshees. Siouxie might be scary, but she wasn't *personal*.

He had nothing to go to Vegas for, except Vegas itself; it only *used* to be home. But that might not occur to anyone until too late. A person could enter Las Vegas at one edge and come out in any direction, as himself, or someone else, or nobody. All it took were a few resources.

The plane ticket was on his credit card. The hotel would be, too, because it and the taxi to get there were the next reasonable bend in the trail. After that, he had cash, and the semi-fluid casino economy of the Strip and Fremont Street. This commercial flight wasn't even a getaway car. It would only take him to the scene of the crime. Fade off the record, don't set off any alarms, and by the time they thought to look there'd be nothing to track him by.

By the time Reyes thought to look. Would he try to bring Chaz back? Would Reyes ask Hafidha to do his hunting?

Sorry, sis. Witch Mountain's right out. It's the first place they'll check.

A coyote could jog across the road in front of your car, plain as day. But once you pulled even with the spot where he'd left the pavement, he'd have disappeared, turned invisible in the middle of open country.

He felt good about what he was doing. He did. It was the right thing to do.

Maybe if he had two bottles, he could even sleep. He hadn't had any luck so far. Funny, some of the deepest sleep of his life had been on the Gulfstream, lying accordion-folded across the seats, with the engines' harsh growl crawling through the frame of the cabin and his teammates discussing life and death only a yard away.

But the Gulfstream had been safety. It was the airlock between ordinary life and the knife-edged all-in game of the job. Sacred space. Daphne would think that was funny.

He would never be on the Gulfstream again, so it didn't matter that the illusion of safety was gone. A good night's sleep was for suckers.

The team would be okay without him. Better, in fact. They wouldn't be distracted wondering if the next full moon would turn him into a werewolf. They'd never need to know he'd turned already.

Hafidha would be angry for a while. Daphne would be hurt. But Hafidha had Erik and Daphne to hang onto, and Daphne had Hafs and Tricia. The team would go on saving people while they figured out what the anomaly was. Being normal, they'd forget him. He'd learn not to remember them. The empty space would fill up with something, because nature hates a vacuum.

He checked his phone for the time. Wheels down in two hours. He realized suddenly that Justin Sullivan was in his ears, whispering *"Home is wherever*

they take you in."

The noise in the back of his throat wasn't loud enough for anyone to hear over the engines. He pinched down on the click wheel until the iPod powered off.

He caught Darice's eye and held up the little vodka bottle. She brought him another.

He'd learn to sleep. He could learn anything.

*

Airports didn't have luggage lockers anymore. The bus station did, though. *"Avoidance of Greyhound Use as a Preferential Indicator in Profiling Foreign and Domestic Terrorists."* He could write the article, but no one would realize it was supposed to be funny. And he wouldn't be writing articles anymore, anyway.

The bus station was also the Plaza Casino, which had the same relationship to the Strip casinos as a bus station had to an airport terminal. He threaded through the ghost-people at the slots, across sticky carpet, through air that was more dampened than cooled and full of recirculated cigarette smoke, to the restrooms nearest the Casino's front doors. *Hi there, Eyes in the Sky. Just going to pee. In case someone wants to examine the footage later.*

The men's room was an improvement on a bus station, anyway. He appropriated a handicapped stall, set his duffel and backpack side by side on the floor, and began to edit his past.

The iPod? In the duffel. It knew him too well, but it could be written over. His pistol? He ought to put it in the backpack. Six months ago he wouldn't have hesitated. Now the idea sent his heart rate scrambling upward. He slid the gun into his concealed-carry belt bag and buckled it around his waist.

The folder with his FBI credentials went in the backpack. The Adorable Overhyped Phone followed it. His laptop--

He could write over that, too. He just couldn't write over the parts that weren't on the hard drive, and they would pull on him like a hook in the roof of a fish's mouth. One little peek at a LiveJournal. A quick e-mail check, just in case. He'd hurt less if he rejected the bait in the first place. He put the laptop in the backpack.

He slid the photos in, too, quickly, trying not to look. Even so, he saw a streak of blood-red, and knew it was Hafidha's jacket, and that she was standing on one skate blade with her arms over her head, and Daphne stood spraddle-legged beside her with her arms around Hafs's waist, pretending terror.

He zipped both bags closed, hoisted them, and walked (not fast, not slow, hello, Eyes) back to the rack of luggage lockers. He chose one at random, opened it, stuffed the backpack in, closed the door, and turned the key. As soon as the bolt shot home he wanted to open it again. Instead he pulled the key and pushed out the front doors into night air stinking of car exhaust, cigarettes, and piss, a street lit by every color light source known to science.

There was a trash can just outside the casino. He stretched out the hand with the key in it and let go. It dropped, flashed reflected light once, and disappeared among decaying fast food, half-empty soda cans, cigarette butts, crumpled flyers for strip clubs and escort services. He wiped his hands on his jacket, as if he'd actually reached in after it instead of just watched. Then he headed down the block. This time it didn't matter if he walked too fast.

At a no-name convenience store he bought a prepaid cell phone and a 100-minute card with cash. The clerk never looked up from the register. Chaz wondered if the camera in the corner was really recording video.

The strap of his duffel bit into his shoulder as he stepped back onto the street and hailed another cab; it was a small pleasure to have it off him and in the trunk.

As he slid into the back seat, he checked, unobtrusively, that the door locks and handles were there, and worked.

"Where to?" the driver asked, when Chaz didn't tell him.

He needed a space between lives, and a perch to reassure anyone who cared that he hadn't flown away. "The Riviera, please." He could play poker and they'd comp the room. And people tended to forget the Riviera. It wasn't a castle or a pyramid or the New York skyline. He sank into the seat cushions and closed his eyes, while the cab zigzagged out of downtown, scuttled and sat in the Strip traffic.

"Staying long in Vegas?" asked the driver.

It was an opening, to be followed by a list of resources and an offer to take him there. Taxis were part of the service industry, after all. "I live here," he lied. It bought him a quiet trip, sheltering behind his eyelids from the hail of animated light, to the Riv's front door.

His room was on the fifth floor, and the window didn't open. Safer that way, and worth not being able to air out the musty smell that survived every Riviera remodel. It had all of two blind corners counting the bathroom, but he cleared it anyway, and left the shower curtain pulled back, the bathroom door open, and the lights on in case it was still dark when he returned.

People were murdered in hotel rooms. Hallways, too. And elevators, though it was statistically unlikely except in cases of execution, where the killer was efficient, highly organized, and had no need to spend time with the victim. It would be possible for a kidnapping or a murder to occur on a casino floor, but the cameras would spot it.

And if it was a kidnapping, that would increase the chances of finding the kidnapper and rescuing the victim. Fortunate, since who could keep up reasonable vigilance in a place so full of noise, light, movement, voices, emotions?

He was surrounded by so many potential threats, he couldn't feel threatened. So maybe his elevated heart rate was low blood sugar, not the flashing and clanging of the slots.

The buffet was probably closed, but Kady's would be easier anyway. What he really wanted was Steve Wynn's mom's bread pudding, but the Riv wasn't an MGM Mirage property, and he was afraid if he left, he'd be too exhausted to make it back. He got to the coffee shop just as he realized the movement he kept making with his left arm was supposed to end with his thumb hooking the strap of the backpack. He jammed both hands in his pants pockets.

He got down half a burger and a whole plate of fries. The fries could be eaten without thinking, but the burger required both hands. The spongy bun and stiff, charcoal-and-blood-scented meat made his gorge rise every time he took a bite, and he had to force himself to swallow.

He was waiting for the check and trying to impose patterns on the keno numbers when he heard, "Chaz? Charles Villette?"

What were the odds of being spotted by someone he used to know? Not that bad, actually. The resident population of Las Vegas wasn't exactly New York City. He should have thought of that.

It was a woman with wide, high cheekbones, dark eyes, and curly black jaw-length hair. She was straight-shouldered, small-waisted, and round-hipped. She wore a red cowgirl shirt; the red pearl snaps caught the light and glared like eyes in a flash photo. She beamed at him. "We--I went to high school with you. Maybe you don't--"

Noses didn't change much, or the shape of the eyes; the small crescent scar off-center on her chin was familiar, too, pale against rose-brown skin. A yearbook picture formed in his head, with a name under it. Martina Alcantar. "Martina," Chaz said, trying to sound pleasant and non-committal at once.

He'd been a teenaged boy once, and in one thing at least he'd fit the profile. She'd had long hair then, gelled and pulled back to try to tame it. He remembered walking behind her in the hall, watching that cloud of hair bounce, her flared hips swing without conscious effort, her calf muscles flexing and strong under her tan skin. She'd played soccer with a fierce joy; he'd been distracted by the sight while doing grounds cleanup in lieu of detention, and got hit in the back of the head with a basketball.

Chaz swallowed with what little spit was left in his mouth.

Her eyes moved quickly over him--trying not to stare, but sizing him up. *If she says I haven't changed a bit*, Chaz thought, *I'm going to break the water glass and cut my throat with the jagged edge*. His own ferocity startled him.

"Looks like the real world is doing all right by you," she offered instead.

He had to wonder what her standard of comparison was. But he was still dressed for D.C.--shirt, tie, brown corduroy jacket--which made him look as if he worked for a living. "Doing great," he lied.

"You're FBI now, right?"

That one was too tricky to answer in his present state. And why would anyone he went to high school with follow his career? He shrugged and smiled and kept trying to think of things she knew they had in common. "Your sister was a year ahead of me. Angela."

She smiled, nodded (too much, to acknowledge something so small--*stop it*), and her voice was bright and brittle when she answered, "Can't hardly forget Angela."

Don't fish for the reaction, it has nothing to do with you-- "Is she still in town?"

Martina's smile decayed slowly. "Jesus, even you. Even after the way she always was..."

He was floundering. He hated floundering. "What?"

"Aren't you--" Martina was frowning outright now, but it looked like confusion, which Chaz sympathized with. "I'm sorry," she finished, "we're not on the same page, are we?"

"I'm not sure. We're not making small talk?" The mirror would tell him. The mirror could reflect what she meant, what she expected to hear in return. What good was a superpower if you didn't make use of it?

If he were a sociopath, he would. So maybe he wasn't one yet.

"Crap." She slicked her hair back from her temples with both hands. He remembered that gesture. "Swear to God, I'm not usually a jerk. I just came off a hard shift." She shrugged, and gave him an awkward smile that flashed a crater of dimple to the right of her mouth. "I guess the sight of a long-lost high school friend brings back all my awesome ninth grade social skills."

Upstairs there was a room with the lights on that was his, all his. And confronted with a pretty girl who seemed to want to talk to him, he longed more than anything to lock himself in, put his pistol on the nightstand, and go to sleep. Under the circumstances, he was surprised how polite he sounded. "Martina, we weren't friends. I mean, not that we wouldn't be, but... We didn't really know each other."

She bit her lip and looked down. *The jerk's on the other foot. You couldn't have chatted like a human being for five minutes and said, "Hey, gotta go, have a nice life?"* Except, what would they chat about? High school? Nothing good could come of that.

But when she raised her head, she wore a skewed wry smile. "Yeah. Figure of speech, kind of? I'm sorry, would you mind if I sat down? It was a *really* hard shift."

"I was just about-- Uh, sure. Please do."

She slid out the chair across the table and dropped into it. Even tired and unsure of her welcome, her unconscious physical confidence made him think of Brady. The way she sat down, left hip further back in the chair, right hip a hair less flexed, triggered his own muscle memories. The adjustment she might make for a clip-on right-side holster.

"You're a police officer?" he said.

Her head rocked back a little. "Jesus. How did you-- God, that's right, you're with the BAU, aren't you? You're a profiler."

"Well--I mean, we develop profiles. We don't call it... I'm... The BAU, yeah." *Stop talking now. You won't make it better.*

She grinned, slow and wide like a cat stretching. "Damn. I'd ask how you figured it out, but I don't want to wreck the effect. Yeah, Las Vegas Metro, vice squad."

"Wow. That's great." It was probably hell, actually. But she must have known that going in.

"Just tested for sergeant, so I've got cramps in my fingers." She beamed and held up both hands and four pairs of crossed fingers. "It's early, but hey, I figure it doesn't hurt to try."

He opened his mouth to ask how long she'd been police, and instead heard himself say, "So why does it still bug you, that your sister was popular?"

Yes, he was too tired to filter properly.

"What makes you think that?" Martina's smile had a freeze-dried quality.

He could say, "You told me," but it would be a terrible idea. He raised his hands palm-up, a contained shrug, and said, "Never mind. Really."

"You must be the bomb at parties." She pushed her hair back again, and looked away, toward the windows with their blinds drawn. "Would you've called Angela 'popular?'"

From where he'd stood, almost everyone could have passed for popular. "Wasn't she?"

Martina harrumphed. "She was the bitch queen of the senior class, and she ruled by fear. Tell me she didn't screw with your head at least once."

"My head's been screwed with by experts since then. In the book of Chaz Villette your sister doesn't even get cited in the footnotes." Martina eyed him a little sideways, frowning, so he dialed it back. "It's all right, really. I don't think she did any lasting harm."

"Only to herself."

The waitress arrived with the bill and saved him from answering. Charge it to the room, and he could flee.

"She married Ron Shayle, for God's sake."

He wasn't really scared. Not anymore. It was just the shock of hearing the name when he wasn't prepared that had him pressed into his chair, forgetting to breathe.

"Oh, crap," Martina sighed. "Tell me you didn't, in fact, have a crush on my sister. Because I'd hate to think you have serious masochistic tendencies."

"What? No. Not my type." He forced his body through the panic--raise the left hand, close the fingers around the water glass, slide it an inch along the table. He didn't trust himself to lift it yet. His back muscles throbbed, but at least they didn't spasm.

Her eyes narrowed, just barely. "You sure of that?"

Questioning the suspect, he thought, and irritation got him through the last of the fear. "Entirely. And Ron's probably got redeeming qualities."

Martina's expression was still evaluating, and Chaz wished he knew what was going on behind it. She said, "Ron joined the Marines, they got married, he got deployed to the Sandbox, came home after two years, and she filed for divorce. Leaving out the details, of course."

Ron and Angela had dated for most of high school. But married might have been different, in a not-good way. Or maybe after two years in Iraq Ron had come home as someone different. In a not-good way.

The idea that he might have something intimate in common with Ron Shayle almost made Chaz laugh. "The details are usually nobody else's business."

"You think? Depends on the details, doesn't it? I'd say that Ron breaking her nose and her collarbone makes things a little more general-interest."

"I'm okay, cowboy," she'd said, and hid the cut lip and swelling cheek behind the hand that rubbed her eye. "I kind of had a fight." She could have told him she'd had an accident, but he knew his mom tried never to lie to him.

He remembered his mother's hands. They looked a lot like his did now, clutching the water glass, large with long fingers and defined knuckles.

Martina was watching him. He must have given her what she was looking for, since she broke eye contact and reached for the check. "Can I get this?"

"No." He took a breath before he said, "I'm putting it on the room."

She frowned. "But aren't you--"

"Really, no thanks." *I'm not staying with non-existent old friends. And I wouldn't even if they existed*.

She braced both hands on the chair seat, as if to push out of it. Then she shook her head. "Chaz--" She was fighting with herself over something; her jaw worked, her eyes moved as if she were reading the arguments inside her head. Finally she focused on his face, and her voice was harsh and flat with the struggle when she said, "I'm afraid for her."

"For Angela? You said they were separated--"

"He follows her. He calls her and hangs up. He leaves threatening messages on her phone. He slashed her tires in her driveway. He poured gasoline all over on her front porch and left a box of matches on the doormat. She got a dog for protection. She came home and found it shot dead in the back yard."

"She should get a restraining order--"

"Her sister is a *cop*, Chaz. Of course she got a restraining order. So?"

There was nothing he could do that she hadn't. He could turn his back; even a normal person would. "So? Her sister is a cop."

Martina's arms folded tight around the hurt. Good punch, Chaz. "I can't protect her."

"Where's the rest of Vegas Metro?"

"They're..." She clenched her hands, straightened her spine. "They're good cops. Mostly. But he's...he's a vet."

It took a moment for the penny to drop. "A war hero."

"Nobody says so, but the uniforms-- You can tell they're thinking, 'He served his country and the bitch dumped him.' And they *hate* domestics."

He said, "Domestic violence calls are statistically more likely to result in injury or death to a police officer than any other emergency call." Because stats could be painful, but they weren't messy.

Martina's fingers brushed her mouth, then dropped. "Is there anything your guys can do? I know, I know, this isn't a Federal thing. I just...want to know if he's going to hurt her again. Maybe if I had something I could take to Violent Crimes..."

"Almost certainly. There will probably be several incidents, escalating in degree of harm; he's moved from verbal threats to property damage to death of an animal. Each act makes him feel more powerful. But it also increases his anger and frustration when it doesn't accomplish his goal. He won't stop on his own."

"You mean, he'll kill her." Martina's face was gray-under-cinnamon, her eyes round. He'd been a monster after all.

"I have to go." He stood up. The chair tipped onto its back legs. He twisted to grab it, and his back jabbed him with pain.

"Chaz, wait, goddammit--"

He couldn't. His heart raced, sweat crawled on his scalp and chest and under his arms, and his lungs clawed for air. "So what's the going rate? Twenty-five cents a day plus expenses?"

"What?"

"I'm not Encyclopedia Brown. And I'm not here to clean up anyone else's mess."

He snatched the check and lurched for the register, before he could shame himself further.

*

The sun was up, slipping through the inevitable gaps in the hotel room drapes. He could turn off the lights.

Chaz shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over the corners of the bedroom mirror to hide the glass. He unknotted his tie and dropped it on his unopened bag. Then he sat on the bed and took off his shoes, pretending that each stretch and twist didn't make his tired back muscles burn. A long day.

Chaz Villette hadn't had that kind of pain and weakness. He got hurt and healed. Just another reason why he had to stop pretending, why Chaz Villette had to disappear.

It was easy to be a knight-errant when you knew every time you rode out to battle that you'd come back to ride out again. You never had to hold anything in reserve for yourself. Chaz Villette, smug, oblivious, shiny-armored knight that he thought he was, would have melted like wax at a story from a desperate woman about her sister in peril from a deadly husband with invisible wounds.

That was before he'd had his heart surgically removed without benefit of anesthetic.

Chaz stretched out on the bedspread and stared at the ceiling.

*

Reyes sat, upright and stern, in the hotel desk chair. "None of our models account for every instance of anomalous behavior." He frowned down at Chaz.

Chaz knew what Reyes was waiting for. A new model. Figure out the pattern. Chaz wanted to, *longed* to. Reyes's expression would soften, he'd nod briskly, maybe he'd even snap, "Good," and Chaz would feel warm and happy and wanted.

But he couldn't. He couldn't even sit *up*, for godsake. He didn't want to lie here useless, helpless, with Reyes impatient and disapproving over him, but he couldn't move.

"You, for instance," Reyes continued. The edge in his voice grew sharper. "You're impossible. You're skewing our data to the point where interpretation is nearly hopeless."

Sit up. Sit up. There. He felt the hard wood of the chair against his shoulder blades, against the protesting muscles.

The mirror across from him reflected the hotel room and the chair. The chair was empty.

No, no. I did it by accident. Now Reyes knows.

"I'm sorry." His voice was a frightened, childish whine. "I can still help. I don't want to hurt anyone, I know I don't. Please." He turned his head--there, he could move his head--but he couldn't see Reyes.

The motion pulled his wounds open. It didn't hurt; the edges parted like lips, a little sticky, and he felt air cold against exposed tissues. He moved to push them closed, but his hands stayed in front of him, side by side. Somewhere a chain chimed, link against link.

"You wanted this," Reyes said. "You tried to reconcile the data. You failed. If you weren't even strong enough for that..."

Wanted what? Whatever it was, he'd try again. He couldn't bear the disapproval, the disappointment, in that familiar voice behind him.

He raised his head to see the mirror again. Now the chair he felt beneath him was occupied. William Villette sat in it. It was William Villette's eyes he looked out of. The person leaning forward from behind him, cheek close to his/William's tangled hair, meeting his gaze in the mirror, was Chaz Villette. He mantled them both with wings the color of dried blood.

Beyond one feathered margin he could see the bed, still made, and the feet and legs of someone lying on it. Glossy cordovan loafers, pressed flannel dress slacks. Legs straight, toes pointed up, fabric smooth. He knew it was Reyes, and he knew without seeing anything else that Reyes was dead.

"It's all right," the dream-Chaz breathed in his ear, fluttering a curl of his hair. "There's no shame in needing help."

The belt slid around his throat, narrow as wire, and he remembered: he'd wanted to die.

He was upright on the hotel bed, his ears roaring with his heartbeat and his frantic breathing. The room was empty. The mirror on the opposite wall was

still blinded by his jacket. And his wrists thrust out side by side in front of him.

He made it to the bathroom in time to throw up in the toilet. *Good-bye, little french fries.* At least it wasn't the whole burger.

The internal voice of his new self suggested that other people, *normal* people, went off AZT and didn't hang onto the side effects like a souvenir from Disneyland. Normal people managed to have emotional reactions that didn't involve their stomachs. His new self was ashamed that he was lying on the bathroom floor, the cold tiles freezing him through his shirt and biting into the bones of his face, the walls bouncing back the sounds he made while trying not to cry.

His new self seemed to think that dreaming of murder--dreaming of being murdered and being the murderer--was nothing to wake up screaming about. Maybe it was right. Maybe he was a monster, after all, and was just now getting the hang of it.

The dreams weren't, as it turned out, the sort of thing he could tell Falkner.

You carry your own bags, take out your own trash. Everyone on the team knew that. But sometimes you had to move something too big for you, didn't you? How can you ask for help, when you already know the answer is, "That's not my load?"

Stand up on it, or get off the rock and quit dogging on the rope.

He pushed himself up to sitting on the bathroom floor, leaning his head back against the wall. He could still smell Pine-Sol and mildew from the tile. The fluttering in his nerves told him he needed to eat something. *Here we go again.*

Oh, he was tired of being broken. He'd been deformed off and on, but not broken, and he hated it. He'd finally made a life that worked and a self he could be mostly at peace with. Both got smashed at once. He'd thought he could glue and suture them back together; who'd notice the crooked spots and missing bits? But he put them back wrong. He didn't like this life at all and didn't know what to do to make it better and was afraid to try to fix it again because he might make it worse. He was grieving for the old Chaz Villette, who hadn't known how much he'd loved his life until it stopped.

He was glad, on reflection, that Reyes hadn't been in the office when he left. He might have gone to Reyes instead of Falkner. Then, instead of quitting, he might have gotten kicked out for hitting a senior agent.

*

Two p.m. was still morning in Las Vegas. A breakfast-anytime town. If he stuck to pancakes and fruit and maybe crappy restaurant oatmeal, he could probably hang onto them long enough to metabolize them.

Chaz got out of the shower and wiped the condensation from the bathroom mirror. That was where yesterday started, with the mirror. Nothing was going to happen to him now.

He tried to avoid mirrors as much as he reasonably could. He kept spotting his reflection in things and not recognizing himself, but when he looked in the mirror, searching for the differences between himself and the Chaz-that-was, he couldn't find anything specific. Chaz-that-was was definitely gone, though.

The old Chaz would never have done what he did to Martina.

But if he hadn't landed in Las Vegas last night, or stayed at the Riv, or gone to the coffeeshop? She'd have found something, someone else. She could find someone else. He had his own load to haul and problems to solve. He was going to spend a couple hours at a poker table and earn his room; then he'd plan his exit. He had a few days to kill, to make it look as if he was staying put. But when he disappeared, he'd have to make it stick.

The Chaz in the mirror looked exhausted. And smarter than him.

Anyone could have a load too big to lift. This was Martina's.

He had a few days to kill. For a few days, he was still pretending to be an FBI agent.

He toweled his hair and went to dig through his bag for a shirt presentable enough to be seen at a police station.

*

Hafidha would have scored the information he was after nearly as fast as he could describe it. But an hour in the Riv's business center was almost as good as thirty seconds of Hafidha. (Though no one at the business center

called him Ginger Cookie, or admired his tie, or passed him a bag of tortilla chips. *Stop it*.)

So he was at the Downtown copshop fifteen minutes before the change to second shift. The uniform at the desk looked up from the monitor in front of him and narrowed his eyes. He was too young to have been a cop for long, so he shouldn't remember Chaz in any eye-narrowing context. Maybe Chaz hadn't picked the right shirt after all.

"Chaz Villette to see Martina Alcantar?" Chaz said.

"She expecting you?"

"Probably not."

The desk officer eyed him. However exact "probably not" might be, it wasn't either of the answers the cop had wanted. But he picked up the phone receiver and prodded a button. "Tell Marti Alcantar there's a Chaz Villette asking for her." The officer went back to his keyboard.

The building was relatively new and the upholstery on the stacking chairs was still fresh. But the room smelled of disinfectant, as if something unlovely had happened there during first shift. Like a hospital emergency room, it was a place where suffering people came.

Martina walked into the room on the other side of the desk and paused. Her white blouse and clipped-back hair made her look older and inflexible. She studied him, expressionless; Chaz wondered if she wanted the buffer of the front desk glass between herself and him. He tried to make his face say apologetic things.

She opened the door between the waiting area and the offices and nudged her head sideways: Come in.

The cop at the desk frowned. "Hey, what do--"

"Did the terror alert go to red since I checked? He's a Fed."

"How was I supposed to know?"

Martina shot a glance at Chaz. He shrugged. "It didn't seem relevant." And even if his ID hadn't been in a locker at the bus station, he wasn't in the habit of flashing it to impress strangers.

Martina led him through the bustle of shift change: a thicket of uniforms, the smell of weak coffee, black humor in the air like gnats. She waved him into an undersized squad room and closed the door behind her.

There was a white board at Chaz's back; in front of him a few disordered ranks of chairs that had probably started the day in rows. Yellow legal pads and pens scattered around, an A/V setup on a rolling cart, a coffee maker in the corner. It was scary how well he knew this room he'd never been in. The team told police officers what they were looking for in rooms like this.

Habit made him turn to see who was taking lead. But of course, he was alone. He needed a moment before he could relax his throat enough to speak. "I'm...sorry."

"It's okay." Her face stayed impassive.

"No, it's not. I'll help."

Martina shook her head. "I'll take care of it."

That was that, then. It wasn't as if Chaz longed to sniff out Ron Shayle's recent past. He could go play poker. He liked playing poker. He'd be perfectly happy. It was what he'd wanted all along.

He sighed. "I really am sorry."

Some of the stone went out of Martina's face and voice. "I get that. But you were right--it was like going up to a doctor at a party and saying, 'Hey, Doc, I've got this mole, d'you think it's cancer?' And I'm guessing you came home because you want a break."

"No, you think?" Well, that was a mood swing so fast it could snap necks. "Sorry. I'm...kind of full of those lately."

Martina looked slantwise at him. "It's weird."

"What?"

"I don't remember you ever doing that."

"Sarcasm? I just tried not to do it when it would get me pounded like a nail."

"That and getting angry. Like this morning."

"Still apologizing for that."

"No, I mean in high school..." The line between her eyebrows looked as if it was familiar with the territory. "When you're a cop, you try not to hit back, because you know in most situations you've got a lot more fist than the other guy. But that's not high school."

"I think I would remember if I'd been turning the other cheek."

"No. You'd just kind of do a fade." Martina raised her eyebrows. "With a couple memorable exceptions."

There had been a couple. They'd brought home to him that he couldn't afford them. There was nobody to intercede for him, to explain that his motives were honorable, though his actions were stupid.

There was nobody to keep him from ending up in the correctional system, except himself.

"But mostly I don't remember you raising your voice," Martina finished. She cocked her head and waited, as if she expected him to argue with her.

You don't raise your voice if you don't want to be noticed. Once the coyote crosses the road, he's invisible. "I had a black belt in sneaky."

Her reaction was quick across her face and gone. But it seemed Martina Alcantar had a limited appreciation for sneaky. Well, she wasn't standing in Chaz's long, narrow shoes.

"When I heard you went to Quantico, I thought you'd wash out. But I guess you learned to stick up for yourself."

Because sometimes there was no one to help you, and no escape. For an instant, he thought he smelled roses. "I guess."

Martina didn't really step back; she just shifted her weight to her back foot. But it put another six inches between the two of them. The needling tone was gone from her voice when she said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. Go enjoy your vacation."

Chaz tore a corner off a legal pad, scribbled his cell number on it, and handed it to her. His cards were in the backpack. "I'm still at the Riv. If that changes, I'll let you know."

She shook her head. "Don't."

He shrugged and walked past her out the door.

*

Libraries deserved more love. Again, no substitute for Hafidha and the FBI's databases, and Las Vegas public transit still sucked. But he had his first layer of information after a few hours at the Michael Graves-designed library on Flamingo. He walked outside, sat on the low wall that framed the approach, and tried not to hyperventilate.

He could call Hafidha. She'd yell at him for not coming to her before he left. But she'd be glad to hear his voice. She wouldn't hesitate to pinch off a little of her available processing power to give him what he needed, even if that power and access and time was arguably rented to the Federal government and Chaz's business wasn't hers.

She would get his ultimate intentions out of him in fifteen minutes. Hafidha was the last person he could call.

What he was doing wasn't profiling. Profiling was a process of observing common tendencies, shared traits, influences that cropped up over and over in the pasts and presents of people who were damaged in specific ways. The process created a rough outline of the kind of person you needed to find, not a name and face and address. When the profile was finished, you had an Unknown Subject, not a suspect.

Chaz had a name, a face, and an address. He needed to turn him into an UNSUB. He needed to figure out Ron Shayle's influences, tendencies, traits, and if he was damaged, how and when that damage would spill over.

It was funny--if you had that sort of sense of humor--how many of the markers for damage were right there in the public record, in newspapers, on microfiche, on line.

Ellen Fenton, 16, gave birth to a male child on July 27, 1981, at Southern Nevada Memorial. Father listed as Rudy Chenoweth, no age or address. Baby named Ronald John Fenton.

1986, Clark County issued a marriage license to Ellen Fenton, 21, and Michael Loder Shayle, 42. In the same year, a change-of-name for Ron Fenton, who would now be Ron Shayle.

Clark County School District records were not exactly public. But Chaz had learned one or two things from Hafidha and elsewhere. Ron's academic records weren't crackable, but some of the attendance records were, and the school nurse's files.

From second grade on, a gradual increase in absences. A series of injuries requiring treatment.

Hospital admittance records were also out of his reach. But police calls to the Shayle residences were archived: noise complaints, domestic disturbances, assault on a neighbor by Michael Shayle (no charges pressed).

Ellen Fenton Shayle's employment history was irregular, and all the jobs listed before 2000 ended in less than a year. Michael Shayle changed jobs frequently, but worked more or less steadily until 1998.

Michael Shayle's death certificate was dated January 2000. Cause of death: head trauma resulting from a fall outside a North Las Vegas bar. Blood alcohol .16. Contusions on the face and lacerations on the knuckles of both hands suggested he had been fighting.

He couldn't get at any record of Ron's military service except the date of his enlistment in the Marines and the date of his discharge (honorable). Chaz didn't need a source of information on Ron's teenage years. He already had that.

He rubbed his eyes. The monster-making apparatus had been at work on Ron Shayle. It didn't always result in monsters, of course. But for years it had been shaping a life right under his nose.

It wasn't as if nobody knew what factors led to violent behavior and serial crime, so how could this keep happening? And if it kept happening in spite of knowledge, how could it be stopped? And if ordinary human violence couldn't be prevented, what hope was there for stopping the anomalous kind?

All they had were toothpicks.

He leaned back against the square, rose-colored pillar, still warm from a day's worth of southern exposure. The sky was streaked with orange above the building to his right, and the shrubby trees were turning into silhouettes around him; the Luxor's spear of white light competed with the fading

sunset. Clouds of bats would be zigzagging through it, hunting dinner. *Come to Vegas. You'll love the casino buffets.*

Ellen Shayle would be at home.

*

The apartment door bumped gently at the security chain as she peered out.

Look harmless. And sixteen. "Mrs. Shayle?" He shifted his feet on the concrete of the outdoor hallway. He'd be a little backlit by the evening sky beyond the railing; he'd need body language as well as words and voice to disarm her.

"Yes?"

"I don't know if you remember me. Chaz Villette? I went to school with your son?"

The slice of her face that he could see furrowed. The air that escaped from the apartment smelled like off-brand air freshener, sweet and faintly petrochemical.

"My--gosh," she said, and her eyes widened. The gap narrowed, and he heard the chain rattle. Then she opened the door and smiled at him. "Chaz Villette, all grown up!"

His autopilot made embarrassed noises while the rest of him worked. She was about fifty pounds over her healthy weight. Her thin hair was dyed ash-blonde and cut short. Her glasses frames weren't the right size; her eyes were off-center in the lenses. Her earrings, small lapis teardrops set in filigree gold, might be a relic of better financial days. She wore blue pants that bagged at the knees and a sweatshirt printed with two angels and a garland of flowers. No obvious illnesses or disabilities.

"I'm home visiting friends--" The living room, what he could see of it, was very clean, but busy: too much furniture, tabletops thick with objects, walls studded with decorations like notes on a bulletin board. The sofa upholstery was faded, the coffee table legs were scarred, the television was fifteen years old.

The newest things in the room were ornaments: a praying-child figurine on the television; a print of a female angel leaning over a sleeping boy; a painted plaque by the door that read, "God never gives us more than we can

carry." The only books he saw were a handful of slender trade paperbacks with bright, unfamiliar spines and titles in script typefaces on a little wall-hung shelf. Chaz couldn't make out the titles from the door.

He wasn't in a position to scorn other people's coping strategies. But he was trained to use those strategies against them.

"Mrs. Shayle--could I come in, just for a minute?"

"Well, I don't know, I've got my TOPS meeting in half an hour--"

Chaz looked at the door mat, back to her face, pressed his lips together. "It--it'll just be for a minute, honest."

And she smiled, swung the door wide, and waved the devil into the house.

"Can I get you anything, Chaz? Something to drink?"

"Could I have a glass of water?"

While she fetched it, he collected the rest of the room. Two family pictures: a school photo of Ron from first or second grade and Ron's senior picture, in frames on an end table. None of Ellen, none of her late husband, no family group, none of what could be Ellen's relatives. No photo album on the coffee table. Except for those two photos, there was no history here.

No portrait of Ron in his dress blues. No snapshots of him from his deployment. Chaz craned his neck to see the refrigerator through the kitchen door. The magnets were bright-colored, and some had text on them. None of them held up photos.

He looked away just in time as Ellen came out of the kitchen. "Here you go." She handed him a glass printed with blue roses. The ice cubes pinged.

"Thank you." Look down, sip. He let his voice wobble when he said, "Do you--do you know Matthew 6, verse 14?"

She blinked.

"'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'"

She stared as if he were shrubbery spontaneously combusting. Then she burst into tears.

Chaz helped her into an armchair, handed her the flowered box of Kleenex, offered her his water glass, and knelt on the very clean wall-to-wall carpet beside her while she cried. He felt evil. And stupid. He hadn't meant to crack her open, but of course, that was the verse that was most likely to do it if any did. "Mrs. Shayle, I'm so sorry--"

"No--no." She wiped her nose, groped for another tissue. He held out the box. She used the new one to clean her glasses, then pinched it in her hand. "It's not--"

Only a monster would keep her from backing away from the edge. He leaned closer. "Mrs. Shayle, I need to forgive, and I can't. I need help."

"Do you ask God to help?"

God sent her a messenger, baby boy. Chaz swallowed bile. "I think He sent me to you." But he shivered as he said it.

Tears spilled over her lower lids, over her reddened skin, fell unattended off her chin. Her left hand crept from the corner of her mouth across her cheek, until her fingers found and tugged at one earring. "No. I don't know how. I try and try, but I *can't*." That last word was a muffled howl, the voice of someone who'd learned to cry so no one would hear.

"I think if--if I knew more, I could. If I understood. Can I ask you about your son? About Ron?"

Ellen Shayle's face went slack as she understood. "Ron wouldn't-- He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"I think you know that's not true."

She swayed; Chaz raised a hand to steady her, but before he touched her she drew a quick, short breath, clutched her knees, and looked down at her lap.

"Let me tell you what I think happened." He spoke as gently as he could, and let the pitch of his voice rise a little at the ends of sentences, as if each was a question she could deny. "Your husband hurt you, and Ron. At first he just lost his temper, raised his voice. Then it got worse. He'd slap you or push you. He expected too much of Ron, and he'd punish him when he fell short. You protested, but he said it would make Ron a better man. You wanted Ron to have a father, and if that's what fathers did..."

Her lips twitched, pulled in against her teeth.

"...because that's what your father did, isn't it?" He felt a little sick when she closed her eyes. The cycle of abuse was about expectations as much as anything else. "After a while your husband beat Ron badly enough that you had to keep him out of school sometimes, or lie to the school nurse. You wanted to protect him, but you couldn't do it."

She nodded without opening her eyes or raising her head. She'd failed her son. She'd failed her husband, too, or he would never have been angry. It was her fault. It was her shame, that she'd only done what was possible, not what was miraculous.

"As he got older, he was in trouble at school. Fighting. Talking back to his teachers. Hurting other kids. You knew there was something wrong, but you couldn't say or do anything, because you were afraid to attract attention to your son. You tried to keep your husband's anger focused on you. But there was always enough to spill over onto Ron.

"When your husband died, you thought you might be able to live in peace with your son. But Ron was closed off. He went into the Marines, and you were proud of him, but you didn't really know him anymore."

The tears leaked out from under her closed eyelids. "He took my son away from me. I want to forgive him, but I can't." She groped for Chaz's hand, squeezed it with startling strength. "So the Lord won't forgive me for letting it happen."

He wanted to tell her she was wrong. But that wasn't for him to call, was it? "Mrs. Shayle, does Ron talk about his ex-wife? About Angela?"

"No."

"Has he told you anything about his marriage, or his military service--"

She shook her head hard, and let go of Chaz's hand to blow her nose. "He wrote me letters from Camp Pendleton. Then he wrote saying they were sending him to Iraq."

"And after that...?"

She shook her head again and folded her hands in her lap.

"Have you seen him since--"

"Not since after he joined the Marines. I lost him."

Chaz got to his feet. He took the water glass into the painfully clean kitchen, washed it out, and left it in the drainer. He found a notepad and pen by the powder-blue wall phone. He wrote his new cell number on a sheet, tore it off, and took it back to the living room. She was sitting just as she had been when he got up.

"Thank you, Mrs. Shayle." He handed her the piece of paper. "This is my number. If you need anything, if you think of anything--call me, please?"

She took it without looking up.

He'd tell her another lie, if he could think of one to help. He started toward the door.

"Chaz. Matthew 7, verses 7 and 8. Do you know that?"

He saw the page in his head, and nodded. "'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door--'" Swallow, damn it, swallow. "'--will be opened.'"

"You remember it."

He wanted to give her some comfort on his way to the door, but she'd trumped him on Bible verses. "Thank you," he said again, and let himself out.

Act III

If he drank alone in his room he felt like an alcoholic. If he drank in the bar, at least he was following the local custom. He found an upholstered chair in a spot as far from the entertainment as possible, and wadded his jacket up for a little more cushioning. Then he threw four ibuprofen down his throat and ordered a Bushmill's.

Ron Shayle didn't blame his mother for the abuse. He hadn't abandoned her after his father died; he'd written her from boot camp. It wasn't anger at his mother that made him target Angela. But something had made him stop writing while he was in Iraq. Ron had something he couldn't bring home. But why did his mother blame her husband for it?

Tomorrow, if he could manage it, he'd talk to Angela. That would be fun.

He was at the top of his second whiskey, and the ache in his back had faded to nagging, when he heard Martina say, "You're hard to find."

He dropped his head back against the upholstery so he could see her come up from behind him. She wore black--jeans and a snug knit top with a deep v-neck--a Levi jacket, and cowboy boots with red stitching and toes so pointed they could cause puncture wounds. Her hair was loose again, curling around her face like ornament drawn in India ink. That or her makeup made her eyes look big.

"Isn't the classic reply, 'Not hard enough'?" Except he was glad to see her.

She dragged up another chair, sat, and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee. It should have been butch. He had a good view of the boots and the undulating line of her calf and thigh. "You're feeling classic?" she asked, grinning.

"No, just--how often do you get to say that?"

"Old movies?"

"See? Might never get another chance."

"Lucky I showed up." She flushed and looked away.

He let another mouthful of whiskey go down his throat. "That's Vegas for you."

She tilted her head. "You drunk?"

He thought about it, and decided to tell the truth. "Hardly at all. Does your sister have a job?"

"What?"

"I need to talk to her. I want to know where and when I can find her."

Martina's face did a series of things that suggested she was a rotten poker player. "I thought you were going to drop it."

"I didn't say that."

"Christ." She unfolded her legs and leaned forward over them. The shadow between her breasts in the low neckline made him a little dizzy. "Listen. You

looked like crap last night. Now you look worse. You don't have to do this. Forget it, Chaz. I'm sorry I asked."

So much for her comment about the world doing all right by him. He dropped his head back again and stared at the ceiling dotted with camera domes. "In those old movies, isn't that what they say to the detective when he starts asking the right questions?" On reflection, he could be a little more drunk than hardly at all. But not much.

"And when he doesn't take the hint, they rough him up and dump him down by the river. Chaz--"

"That's no good in Vegas. Maybe the lagoon at Treasure Island?"

"Stop it." She took a long, shaky breath. "Why won't you let it go?"

He could. He could let Ellen Shayle down; she'd never know, nothing would change for her. He could let Martina down. She was a cop, she understood battle fatigue, how it meant that sometimes you couldn't follow through. That you couldn't even explain why, because you couldn't talk about it if your life depended on it.

Instead of answering, he swallowed more whiskey.

The room went on without them: keyboard, bass, and jazz drum kit mauling "You May Be Right;" talking, laughing, a screech from three tables over that made his heart race; a steady *bing-bing-bing* from the slots on the floor.

"What's with your back?" Her voice was rough.

He could stare at her cleavage and not have to meet her eyes, and she wouldn't think it was odd. So he met her eyes. Point of honor. "Injury. I overdid it some today. I think the bus seats are bad for it." That sounded trivial enough.

"As if I didn't feel guilty already," she said on a quavering laugh. "How about if I drive?"

"What?"

"If you're going to keep looking into this, I can at least get you where you're going." She looked doubtful. "I'm not sure my car's a better ride than a bus, but you won't spend as much time in it."

"Don't you have bad guys to catch?"

"I've got some hours coming to me." She wove her fingers together over one knee. "Come on, Chaz. Let me help?"

He looked at her over the top of his glass. Her turn to have trouble with eye contact--why? Still... "Did you know riders aren't allowed to bring coffee onto buses?"

She pursed her lips. "Taxis?"

Chaz shook his head. "No food or beverages."

"That's inhuman."

He smiled. "Thanks, Martina. I'd appreciate the ride."

"Call me Marti. Angela works for Cox Cable. You want to talk to her there or at home?"

"Home." He didn't have to tell her his reasons.

"Pick you up at 5:00?"

He nodded, and she stood up. He wished he knew why she seemed so pleased with the way the conversation had ended. So as she passed, he said, "Did you lose my cell number?"

She stopped. "What?"

"You said I was hard to find." He pulled out his phone, flipped it open, and held it out to show the home screen. No missed calls.

"I--forgot I had it."

"Why did you need to find me, if it wasn't about your sister?" *See? Really not drunk*, he thought, as he watched her turn deer-in-the-headlights.

Her lips stretched in a smile shiny as chrome. "Social call. You should try it sometime."

"Touché," he said to the wake Marti left on the crowded floor.

He looked down at the phone in his hand, the screen still lit. The contacts list was empty, but that didn't matter. He remembered every one of the numbers. He snapped the phone shut.

*

He woke from a dream of someone screaming his name. He'd had it before; it was one of the easy ones, because he never had the feeling there was anyone in danger except him. Usually the voice was Falkner's, but sometimes Reyes's or Brady's. Not so much of the last two, lately.

This time it was Daphne, which was new. It suggested he'd added her to the list of people he ought to listen to more often. He'd have to tell her so when he got home--

Stop it, stop it, *stop it.*

He lunged upright and flung his legs over the side of the bed. Sometimes violent action could break up his thoughts when they began to spiral. It worked this time. So did the stiffness in his back. Yes, he'd overdone it yesterday.

Maybe he'd quit thinking like his old self when he wasn't him anymore. Pretty soon he'd move on. Find something else to do, someone else to be. He just had to find something to help Marti protect her sister, and he could stop playing amateur detective in the ruins of his childhood.

He made himself push up off the mattress and onto his feet, forced himself to do the range-of-motion exercises his physical therapist had taught him. Slow and smooth, to let the weakened muscles warm up. "Most people's large muscle groups need toning *before* they're injured," he'd said, helping Chaz raise his arms a little higher. "After they're hurt, their bodies can't help support the injured area so it can heal. That's one reason why you athletes make better progress in PT."

Until he'd said it, it had never occurred to Chaz that he was an athlete.

He'd always wanted to be a hero. One of his third-grade teachers asked the class what they planned to be when they grew up, and even in third grade, he knew better than to tell the truth. But he'd never had any other career goal. He vacuumed up information and skills and hid them, because the best heroes were like coyotes: there and gone, capable and anonymous.

In college, when everyone around him worried about employability, he collected degrees because knowledge was the ultimate utility belt. His

statistics thesis advisor asked him, in more academic terms, what he wanted to be when he grew up. Chaz didn't tell him the truth, either.

Then Reyes recruited him for the Bureau, and Chaz didn't have to hide what he wanted to do for a living. Because he was doing it.

Except he couldn't anymore.

The physical weakness would heal--or heal enough, at least. But the stresses inside his head and out... He really ought to forgive Brady, even though it didn't matter now. He'd only been acting on the same doubts Chaz had. Brady just didn't have as much evidence to back them up.

He dreamed of being a murderer. He'd developed an external manifestation, which he hid. The first thing he used it for was to kill someone. (In self-defense, yes. But.) Then he'd experimented with it on strangers without their consent. Under the pressure of anxiety responses, flashbulb memory, emotional lability, and the daily stress of the job, how bad would he get?

They still didn't know what it took to make a gamma.

Boundaries, limits, self-protection, self-care. He knew the words and the theory behind them. He owed it to himself and to his friends to get out of a situation that could hurt him or others.

He had to get out of the hero business before he killed somebody.

But there was Marti trying to figure out how to keep Ron Shayle from hurting her sister. There was Ellen Shayle, who'd lost everything, even God. The hero business was like addiction: there was always another good reason to shoot up.

The difference between profiling and the rest of police work was the primary question. Other cops asked who, how, when, where. A profile started with Why. All right, he would ask the question he was used to. Why had he walked off the job and picked it right back up the minute he got the chance?

He had a pretty good idea what Reyes's answer was. Reyes, who would push chips with human faces into the pot and draw to a straight, because he believed he was too good at the game to lose.

He hoped like hell Reyes's answer wasn't his.

Marti thought he hadn't fought back. She was wrong, of course. They saw it in case after case: the ones who survived were the ones who fought back. He'd fought back, though maybe not the way Marti would have. He always had.

Was that how you kept from being a gamma, or how you became one?

Sweat itched and prickled on his skin, and the room stank of it. Exercise or panic attack, it didn't matter--the afternoon light was bright at the edges of the drapes. He had time for a shower and a meal he didn't want.

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"1995 Jeep Wrangler," Marti said proudly. "Half of 'em were absolute junk and died early deaths. But the ones that are still running will be running forever."

"Wow," Chaz said. This one, parked in the Riviera's loading zone, looked as if it had had a few near-death experiences already. He could respect that. It was mostly still black, where UV and trauma hadn't reached. It lacked side curtains or, for that matter, doors. He climbed into the passenger seat, wedged his unopened bottle of water between the seat and the frame, and studied the roll cage the ragtop covered. It appeared to be intact. "Does it have a name?"

Marti eyed him suspiciously. He felt heat rising up his face.

"I--I named my VW. I mean, not that all cars have names. But older ones, sometimes..."

"What did you name it?"

"The Blue Beetle. There's a comic book..." Oh, god, he was making it worse. *Shut up, Chaz.*

Marti nodded. "This is Fluffy."

"You...just made that up."

"Nope. Belt."

She took off from the curb in a style that made him grab for it. *Maybe I should have stuck to the bus.*

"I have to swing by the station for a second. That okay?"

"Sure." Fluffy bounced and swayed through traffic, more like a midway ride than a vehicle. It made the Strip much more exciting. And it *was* better than the bus. There was padding.

"Nosy question?" Marti said.

Chaz made a noncommittal noise.

"Why didn't you rent a car?"

Because once he turned in the rental, his window for disappearing would be only as long as it would take to buy a plane ticket. He shrugged.

"I wasn't sure... I mean, a lot of people never learn to drive."

"I can drive," he said, stung. "I had to take the pursuit and defensive driving class at Quantico."

The silence lasted half a block. "You learned to drive...in pursuit driving?"

Well, no. But he found he liked the way her eyes opened wide and her eyebrows disappeared under her hair. "Required course," he said gravely.

"Do not *touch* my car keys."

"I was pretty good!"

"Do *not*."

Chaz realized he was grinning. He turned to look at the roadside to hide it.

Daphne wouldn't let him drive, either. He felt his grin fade.

Copshops always seemed different when you were supposed to be there, or came with someone who was. This time Downtown didn't make him wish he took up less space.

A tall, dark-skinned man in a gray suit and sky-blue tie stuck his head out of a windowed office. "Yo, Alcantar!" He waved a sheaf of paper. "You don't sign 'em, they ain't real."

"That's what I came for, boss." Marti jerked her head toward the man in the suit. "Lieutenant Jimmy Baxter, Special Agent Chaz Villette of the FBI"

Baxter stopped with his hand halfway out and an expression half-formed.

Chaz opened his mouth to say "Not anymore," and remembered it would only complicate matters. "Not...officially. I mean, I'm just--I'm a friend of Marti's. Vacation."

Baxter's expression turned into polite interest. "First time in Vegas?"

"No. I grew up here." He turned to Marti. She was dealing with her paperwork; no rescue there.

"That's gotta be weird, growing up in Sin City."

"No weirder than New York. Probably."

Baxter frowned. "Who said anything about New York?"

"He's a profiler, boss," Marti broke in, and handed Baxter her papers. "Watch what you say."

"Well, damn." Baxter laughed.

"Actually, it's not--" Chaz began, but Marti took his arm.

"I'm out of here. Let's hit the road, Chaz." On the way to the door, she muttered, "Baxter still pronounces it 'Ne*vah*da.'"

"That was a coincidence. The New York thing? I'm not that good with accents." Lau would have been able to name the borough.

"Huh." Marti sent a smile into the middle distance. "Don't tell him that. You might need the wizard credit someday."

Profiler voodoo--it worked even when you weren't doing it. Then an image passed through Chaz's mental front hall: the Chrysler Building, glinting tiny and gold, against pale blue.

Baxter's tie tack. Oh.

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The green stucco tract house was showing wear: faded trim, surface cracks, weeds sprouting in the gravel around the foundation. But it had been well-kept not long ago.

Chaz rang the bell. Marti waited behind him, and it was so much like other doorsteps, other unannounced calls, that he almost rummaged for his ID to show when the door opened. He had his face under control when it did.

Angela Alcantar--no, Shayle--was a lot like her house: well-kept not so long ago. But she was close enough to her high school self that he had to contain an inward flinch. Her black hair coiled over her shoulders and down the front of a pink shirt with the top three buttons open. Like Marti, nothing about her was angular. She wore dark lip liner, which Chaz was fairly sure was out of fashion; the lipstick inside it was half worn off.

Her skin creased at the corners of her eyes and puffed below them, and tiny wrinkles circled her mouth like a halo. Two hard furrows marked the space between her thin-plucked brows. The crevices between her teeth were stained faintly brown. She looked tired, and older than she was, and grim. That was new since high school.

He probably still didn't like her. But he felt his damned hero impulse click on like a light switch.

Angela gave him a curious up-and-down survey, without recognition. Then she spotted Marti over his shoulder. "What's--"

"Angela," Chaz said, smiling. "Chaz Villette. Remember me? We went to school together."

"Hey, Ange," Marti added.

Apparently he no longer looked like a starving juvenile delinquent. Watching Angela's face, the word "dumbfounded" popped into his head. There was a word that didn't get enough work.

"Holy shit," Angela said.

"Could we come in?" Chaz asked.

They could, of course.

Angela tossed old newspapers, laundry, unopened mail off the living room furniture ahead of them, grabbed the remote and muted the television. A tumbler half-full of ice and light brown liquid sweated on a two-week-old *TV Guide* on the coffee table.

"Christ, Marti, you could have called first. I haven't been able to clean in a week."

"You hadn't cleaned in a week the last time I was here," Marti said. She dropped into the far armchair. When Chaz took the couch, Angela would

have to take the other chair, almost knee-to-knee with Chaz. Marti had done this before.

His reflection added itself to the image on the TV screen. Without sound, the movie became image after jump-cut nerve-wracking image. It would stay in the edge of his vision while he talked to Angela. He clenched his teeth and sat on the couch.

Angela sat in the chair they'd picked for her. She reached past Chaz for the glass, drank, set it back down. The smell that trailed behind it was iced tea, and he felt ashamed of what he'd first thought. He'd feel more ashamed if she'd offered them any.

Marti led off, asking Angela about work, talking about her own. She did it easily, as if she was used to setting her sister up for someone else to take a shot at her. Or maybe she was just far into good-cop mode, and it didn't matter that the person across from her was Angela. Either way, it made him uncomfortable. That and the television.

Angela wore no outward marks of the damage Ron had done to her. She held her shoulders a little stiffly; the cracked collarbone was recently healed.

She kept looking slantwise at Chaz, as if she expected him to turn into something if she took her eyes off him. "So what the hell brings you here, Chaz?" she asked. Handing him the ball herself.

"I'd like to ask you about Ron."

Her recoil was small but unmistakable. Her hands twitched, started toward something, dropped to her lap. "He's a son of a bitch. End of story."

"Hasn't changed much, then?"

She frowned, scoring the lines in her face deep. "If that was supposed to mean, 'I told you so,' don't give yourself any fucking medals. You didn't."

Way to encourage the witness, Chaz. He needed to take the conversation back. The TV image jittered and flickered in his right eye like an intermittent rustle in the bushes. Shut it out.

He hung his head, wiped his palms on his thighs. "I'm sorry, Angela. Guess there are things I should let go." He let out the puff of air that could pass for laughing. "I--I guess that's why I'm here."

He felt the change as much as saw it. Her posture was the same, but less rigid. "Whatever."

"I mean, I pissed him off, but Ron was always great to you." The vocabulary and body language of high school faded back into his mouth and muscles. The protective coloring that had worked then would work now.

"Yeah." Angela looked down and away. Her right hand made the arrested reaching movement again. "He was."

Chaz said gently, a little wistfully, "You wouldn't have married him if he wasn't."

The skin contracted around her eyes, as if she was trying not to blink. "Guess nothing lasts forever, huh?" She swallowed. "Marti told you, didn't she? What Ron did."

"That he hurt you."

Angela laughed. "He put me in the fucking hospital. You make it sound like a broken heart."

She sat with her shoulders hunched, her head a little down, scowling. He'd once seen a red-tailed hawk in a zoo, a rescued bird. The humerus of its left wing had been shattered when it hit the windshield of a car; it would never fly again. It had sat hunched on its perch, glaring at him through the glass.

"Do you remember the first time you were afraid of him?"

"I didn't say I was afraid of him."

He lowered his chin, softened his face, turned his eyes up to her.

Angela sat back abruptly. She propped her far elbow on the arm of the chair and cradled her chin in her palm, curled her fingers over her mouth. "When he came back from the goddamn desert--" Her lips made a little twisted smile that had nothing to do with the rest of her face. "It was like he couldn't hold still. He couldn't stick to anything. Jesus, I asked him to take the trash out once and he didn't get it past the carport. And he wanted me to listen to everything he said, but then he wouldn't *say* anything."

"Could you tell what he wanted to talk about?"

Angela shrugged.

"He'd want you to pay attention." He kept his eyes on her face, because that would suggest honesty and dependability to her. And allow him to see every shift in her expression. "He'd start to say something, but he'd stop. You tried to be patient, because that's what he seemed to need. But he'd get mad even when you did that."

The cutting edges of her teeth pressed into her lower lip. "I missed him so much when he was gone. Letters don't--" She reached for her iced tea again and drank. "He doesn't write very good ones, either. At first they were good. But they got sort of, 'Hi, I'm okay, love you, bye' after a while. I guess I should have figured it out, huh?"

Chaz shook his head. "I don't think it was about you."

In a voice like a slap she asked, "Then why was I the one who went to the hospital?"

He knew the answer. But it was all intellect, and few victims were comforted by it.

"Angela, can you--can you tell me what happened? When he hurt you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "We had a fight."

"You had fights before that."

She jerked her head: a nod. "I told him to get some help, I was tired of it. And he said I didn't care what happened to him." In tiny slow stages, she was folding up inside, folding in on herself as he watched. "And I told him I didn't want to hear his God damned war stories. He said... I don't know. We were screaming at each other. That's when...when he hit me." Her eyes were wide and focused on the floor. "And he..." She closed her eyes. "I said 'no.' He didn't..." She turned away from Chaz.

He almost asked her to finish the sentence. Then he understood what she'd said.

Do not lose it. She needs you to stay cool. He was afraid to look at Marti. But he couldn't let them all go free yet.

Angela's hand reaching, again and again. Her stained teeth, and the wrinkles around her mouth. There were no ashtrays on the tables. There was no smell of cigarette smoke. Iced tea.

"Did you and Ron plan to have children?"

He saw Marti's head turn at the corner of his vision. Angela frowned. "What?"

"You're pregnant, aren't you?"

Angela's face clenched as if he'd stabbed her. Marti inhaled once, hard, and was silent. How did he end up being the one to hurt them? *I'm sorry, Mom.*

"None of your damned business," Angela said at last.

"Does Ron know?"

Marti half-rose. "Chaz--"

"No." Angela sagged. This was her last secret. "When I found out... God, I couldn't have a kid with him. So I--I chose the baby. I threw Ron out. The doctor at the clinic knows. Nobody else."

Marti certainly hadn't, from her face.

Now all they had to do was get out gracefully. He didn't think Marti was going to help with that.

"Angela, what Ron did--you didn't make it happen. It would have--would have been the same no matter what you tried. It wasn't your fault."

She went for her iced tea again. Chaz hoped she'd remember what he said, later, when the sound of falling rubble didn't echo so loudly in her head.

"Marti's trying to make sure he doesn't hurt you again. Or hurt anyone else. I know this--this was hard. But it helped."

She looked down at her hands, then up, into his face. "I guess I was going to have to do it someday. It's... It's okay."

It wasn't, of course. But it's what you said at times like this.

Chaz's left hand went for the strap of the backpack he wasn't carrying. He groped for the pen in his inside pocket instead, pulled a copy of *People* across the coffee table, and wrote "Chaz" and his number across a relatively empty bit of the cover. Then he stood up. "That's my cell. Call if I can help, okay?"

He hadn't expected her to go with them to the door, but she did, and let them out in silence. Marti went first, down the front walk without looking back. Chaz turned on the doorstep to do the polite thing. Angela gave him a watery smile and said, "I wouldn't have believed it. But you...turned out kind of hot."

"Thanks," he croaked, and followed Marti out to the Jeep, hoping he wasn't blushing.

The sky was the color of thinned blue ink, warming to lavender and rose over Mt. Charleston and Mt. Potosi. The crystal-city part of town would be flashing and ringing. But here, surrounded by low-roofed houses and the silhouettes of tired palms, he could be in almost any piece of the valley within sight of the glow of the Strip and the Luxor's pillar of light.

Marti started the engine as he scrambled into the passenger seat.

"He shoots. He scores. The crowd goes wild." She popped the headlights on.

He tamped down his guilty conscience. "I warned you."

"No, you said I might not want to be there. Not the same thing." She piloted the Jeep away from the curb so moderately that Chaz checked the side view mirror for cop cars.

"You were--you were good in there."

"I didn't do anything."

"Sometimes that's hard to do."

"No shit."

"Marti. You *asked* me to."

Her shoulders rose and fell with one long breath. "Yeah. I did."

Chaz felt for and found the bottle of water he'd tucked beside the seat. He cracked the cap and drank, and held it out to Marti. After a second she took it, drank, and handed it back. He arched his spine to press his upper shoulders into the seat cushion, braced his feet on the dash, crossed his arms over his knees, and let the darkening streets scroll by while he thought.

If Angela was right that no one knew about it, her pregnancy didn't change anything (except that it became a secret that hadn't needed exposing, so he

could kick himself for doing it). Everything he knew circled around the empty space of Ron's service record, or at least his time in Iraq. Could Metro get access to Marine Corps files? With a search warrant. Which would require an open case and an ongoing investigation. Which this wasn't.

Victimology, then. "Marti, do you remember Ron hurting a girl--a woman--before Angela?"

Marti frowned at the road. "It's her fault now?"

Chaz sighed. "This is about Ron, not Angela. Who an--" He stopped before he said "UNSUB." "Who an offender targets can provide clues to the why."

"Should I care *why* Ron's a shitbag?"

"Helps predict what he'll do next. So you can get ahead of him." Honesty compelled him to add, "Maybe."

After a moment, she said, "Only guys. Maybe the smell of testosterone sets him off."

He had just enough sense not to point out that testosterone was odorless.

So yes, the victimology changed. Before, women and girls had been fellow victims. Like Ron's mother. Until Angela, until now. Might he hurt other women? Might he already have?

"I have to make a stop," Marti said, and turned hard right into a bar parking lot.

The bar pinned down a corner of an aging industrial park. *Broomtail's*, read the sign jutting from the flat roof. The sign's paint was flaking, but the neon outline on the letters camouflaged that in the twilight. The concrete-block walls were painted with larger-than-life airbrushed cartoons of horses with big teeth and sarcastic expressions. Vinyl beer company banners shivered along the eaves. The parking lot was three-quarters full.

"C'mon in," Marti said, sliding out of the Jeep. "I don't know how long this'll take."

He followed her between the cars and trucks, through the door, into the atmosphere of a bar-planet: air thick with spilled beer, fried food, and smoke; Jo Dee Messina on the sound system; jingling slots and video games; and a big-screen TV tuned to ESPN. Chaz counted, at a glance, about forty

customers, a little more than one per car in the lot. The room was hot and deafening.

And at the far end of the bar, laughing with three other men, stood Ron Shayle.

The sound system said, *You can say you've got issues / You can say you're a victim / It's all your parents' fault / I mean, after all, you didn't pick 'em...* There was such a thing as coincidence.

This wasn't one, though. Marti wouldn't meet his eyes.

He could turn and walk back out. She wanted that; she wanted to shame him for the scene with Angela. She wanted to believe he was a coward, and no matter why he left the room, that's what he'd look like.

If he didn't leave, he put the whole enquiry at risk. He put Ron on his guard. *Let her think you're afraid*.

But he wasn't afraid. He was angry. He was lightheaded with it. He walked toward the bar, passing through the crowd that seemed to part for him as he came near.

The last thing he'd expected was that he'd be six inches taller than Ron. And that was Ron in cowboy boots. The difference gave him a good view of the thin spot in Ron's brush cut. But Ron made up the inches in width of shoulder under his gray Henley shirt, in heavy arms and wide, blunt hands. They went oddly with Ron's snubbed, sunburnt nose and round blue eyes. He could look like a cherub with the right expression. Chaz had rarely seen that expression--at least, not pointed at him.

Chaz flagged the bartender and checked the taps for something drinkable. "Sam Adams, please. And bring Ron another of whatever he's drinking." He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and flicked it open, all in one motion, and laid a twenty on the freshly-wiped bar.

Ron's head came up sharply. Chaz turned and smiled. "Hi, Ron. Chaz Villette, remember?"

Ron's three friends didn't react. But Ron's eyes got wide, and narrow, and the twitch of a smile on his mouth was only habit. "Are you...are you shitting me?"

Chaz shook his head. "What are you doing with yourself nowadays, Ron?"

"What's it to you?" Ron's head didn't turn, but his eyes cut right and left, as if he expected backup. Or expected Chaz to have some. Was Ron *afraid* of him?

"Just..." Chaz shrugged one shoulder. "...keeping up with the old neighborhood. Heard you were in the Marines. Iraq."

Ron's fingers flexed on the bar. "Yeah."

"See a lot of combat?"

Some of the tension went out of Ron's posture. He looked Chaz over, and a corner of his mouth curled. But his hands were still nervous. "Yeah, I did. You should try it. Change your fuckin' life."

Chaz sighed. "Must be intense, man. What unit were you with?"

Ron named it, down to the platoon. "And we kicked some camel jockey ass for all you losers back home. We were in Fallujah when Fallujah was hot. Nothin' like it in the world." His face settled into a recognizable version of the Ron that Chaz remembered. Somewhere in the pit of Chaz's stomach there was a chill, but it was no match for the heat of anger.

"I guess you get pretty tight with guys you fight with, huh? Keep in touch?"

Ron took a breath hard and fast through the nose--Chaz couldn't hear it over the noise, but he could see it happen. Ron's eyes cut away from him again. "They don't live around here."

If they'd been playing poker, Chaz could have cleaned him out in half an hour.

Chaz found the beer and a little drift of bills in front of him; he couldn't recall the bartender setting them down. He drank a little and watched Ron. "Bet your mom's glad you're home safe."

Ron picked up his own beer and took his time drinking some. "Yeah. Whatever."

"And Angela? How's she? You two still together?"

Lost him. Chaz saw the shutters close. Ron set his jaw and looked back up, grinning, showing the space where one of his left upper premolars was

missing. "Hey, what are *you* doing nowadays? You a math teacher or something? Wait, I know--you're working for Best Buy on their Geek Squad." His change in tone drew the attention of his friends; they looked to see who was on the receiving end.

Chaz smiled at them. "Nope. I'm with the FBI"

Ron's grin stiffened. Fingers again, as if they were curling around something that wasn't there. He recovered, and said, "The Feds need accountants, too." The three men with Ron snickered, nervous.

"Behavioral Analysis Unit." Chaz added kindly, "I'm a profiler."

Ron's friends, as unobtrusively as they could, shifted themselves and their drinks further down the bar, and watched Ron and Chaz in sidelong fashion.

"So, so--you're a fuckin' FBI agent?"

Chaz nodded.

"But...you don't carry. Right?"

"Uncle Sam bought me a gun. Just like you." *Back off. Don't push him. Don't let anger push you.* Too late for that.

Ron's chin came up, his eyes narrowed, his lip curled again. "Hit anything with it?"

The smell of smoke, roses, and blood, and the drag of the knife caught on bone. Chaz clenched his teeth. But something in his face must have spoken in spite of him.

Ron's pale eyes shifted side to side and settled finally on a spot halfway down the bar from Chaz. "Whatever the fuck you say," he muttered. He slid his fresh beer down toward his friends' and turned his back on Chaz.

Chaz drank off half the Sam Adams at once, pushed his change like a stack of chips at the bartender, and walked out.

He heard the door swing behind him, and the footsteps, too light to be Ron's. He didn't stop until he got to the Jeep. Then he braced himself against it, his hands clenched on the roll cage so hard the vinyl top creaked on its mountings.

Marti stopped behind him.

"You get all that?" Chaz was surprised how steady his voice was.

Steady, but not, perhaps, reassuring, since she didn't answer.

He said, "If there's any chance you'll want to sandbag me again, just say so, and I'll get the hell out and save you the trouble."

"Chaz--"

"Don't fuck with me, Marti. Don't fuck with what I do or the way I do it. I did everything wrong in there. I should have known better. But if something blows up because of it, remember you get to share the credit."

She was silent, and that made him turn to look at her. In the neon, he couldn't tell if she was pale, but her lips were pressed tight and her eyes were down. "It was a shitty thing to do. I apologize, Chaz. No excuse."

He dropped into the passenger seat and tried to breathe like a normal person.

She said, "As soon as you started toward him--"

"You thought you'd get to see me prove my manhood?"

"--I knew I'd screwed up."

The rage and adrenaline holding him up drained away. "You were angry."

"And you were right. All you did was what I asked you for."

Chaz scrubbed his face with both hands. "Apology accepted."

"Will something blow up?"

"I don't know. I lost control of it, but maybe not enough to matter. I hope."

"It looked like you were running the show."

"I put him on alert. I practically told him I know where his secret is. If I wanted to push him into doing something stupid and dangerous, that would be great. But if we're lucky, he'll remember I'm Chaz Villette, for God's sake, and he'll be too proud to be scared of me."

Marti walked around the Jeep and climbed into the driver's seat. "More fool him, then." She started the engine.

Chaz swung his feet in and belted up just in time to survive Fluffy's lunge out of the parking space. The air that yanked and tangled at his hair was cold

now, but it helped clear away some of the fog of emotion and beer. He probably shouldn't have done that thing with the beer.

Marti pivoted the Jeep around a corner and onto Carey. "Prove you forgive me. Let me buy dinner."

He looked over, surprised.

"Well, you haven't had any, have you? I know a really good mom-and-pop Indian place."

"There's good Indian food in Vegas?"

"We're all sophisticated and stuff nowadays."

"Who would have thought," Chaz said.

Act IV

It *smelled* good, at least, enough so that Chaz's stomach actually suggested it wouldn't mind being fed. He and Marti sat at a formica table in a corner, on mismatched chairs, under a travel poster of Mumbai. They ordered samosas, pakoras, navrattan korma, masala dal, roti, basmati and two Kingfishers.

"That's a whole lot of food," Marti observed as the waiter disappeared into the kitchen.

"If there's too much, you'll have leftovers for lunch." There was a time when he could have said that, to Daphne, maybe, and made her laugh. Now there might actually be leftovers.

He could eat if he didn't think too much about it, or if he was ravenous (at least until he took the edge off his hunger). Sometimes intense flavors short-circuited the food-equals-nausea association; sometimes bland ones did.

He was not going to turn down dinner dates for the rest of his life. Not to mention having to look at Dr. Srinivasan's raised eyebrow at every weigh-in. He could handle this.

They talked shop until the food came. Chaz let Marti lead the conversation; he didn't know enough about community policing strategies, and she could tell him about them. There was a limit to what he could say about the

Anomalous Crimes Task Force, after all. She was polite and a little constrained. So was he.

He tried the korma and decided Marti had good taste in Indian. "Did you know that this is often considered to be the most complex cuisine in Asia?"

Marti tore a piece off the roti, stared at it, and sighed. "Chaz, I swear I had no idea throwing Ron at you would be so monumentally fucked up. I was upset about Angela, and I just... I wanted you to be uncomfortable, too. Straight back to high school all the way, I guess."

It sounded like the truth, however hard it was to believe. "Ron and I have some history."

"I know he gave you shit, but he did that with most guys if he was sure they couldn't kick the crap out of him."

"A little more history than that." It came out sharper than he'd meant it to.

Marti winced. "Once you started talking to him, I figured that out."

He wanted to make a peace offering. Information was all he had. "I killed his car."

"What?" Then her eyes widened. "Wait, the Camaro? That was you? But-- What did you do? Sugar in the gas tank?"

"Actually, that's a myth. At worst, it clogs the fuel filter. Sugar doesn't dissolve in gasoline." She was still staring at him, so he added, "Polystyrene beads do, though. The resulting gel clogs the filter *and* the fuel lines. You have to pull the tank and flush out the whole system."

Marti leaned forward, frowning, suspicious, her chin on her knuckles. "That doesn't sound like a dead car. More like a car with a head cold."

"Um." Chaz pushed a smear of tamarind chutney around his plate with the last corner of a samosa. "No. For a dead car, a high concentration of hydrogen peroxide works."

"Hair bleach?"

"Rocket fuel. Burns too hot for a gasoline engine. Warps the cylinders."

Marti's mouth opened and stayed that way.

"Though acquisition and handling can be kind of a challenge."

Marti closed her mouth and sat back. "What I said about not fighting back? I retract that."

Chaz grimaced. "No, that was revenge. Fighting back is when you break someone's trunk latch from the inside." As soon as it was out of his mouth, he regretted having mentioned it.

It took her a second. "Oh. Shit."

"It's all right. I got away." In the dark, on a dirt road in the middle of nothing, with the temperature dropping to freezing. At least he hadn't had to worry about rattlesnakes. And he *had* gotten away.

"My God, no wonder you bit my head off."

The subject was overdue for changing. "Can I have the last of the korma?"

"Um. Sure."

"Then I forgive you."

"No, seriously."

"Seriously. Forgive me for biting your head off?"

"That was justice." She shook her head, sighing. "And we should know. Who'd've thought we'd both end up in the job?"

Chaz put another dab of rice on his plate to go with the korma. "I don't know what else I would have done." He still didn't. He'd forgotten that for a moment.

"Extreme engineering?" Marti scanned the room over his shoulder and grinned. "Everybody was pretty sure that thing with the sandrail was you."

Chaz choked on his beer.

"It's okay," she said. "Statute of limitations."

He added it up in his own head to be sure. "It was going to be a dirt bike, but I couldn't figure out a workaround for the stability problem."

"There could have been three felony counts on that."

"Two."

"National Park, Chaz."

"...Three. Statute of limitations?"

"You're still covered." She eyed his plate. "Don't they feed you in D.C.?"

He was pleased to see he'd eaten everything he took. There was a spoonful of dal left in its bowl, not even enough to justify packaging up. "'They'?"

Marti shrugged. "Restaurants? Takeout? What do people eat in Washington?"

He realized she was half serious, and was glad she hadn't spotted his smile. "Puerto Rican, Ethiopian, and Vietnamese just on my block. Seriously, if I want meat loaf or roast chicken, I have to make it myself."

"You know how to roast a chicken?"

Chaz looked up, surprised. "Sure. He who cooks well, eats well." He heard an echo in the words, and thought of that first Memorial Day barbecue at Brady's. It hadn't occurred to anyone that Reyes could cook. He'd answered their disbelieving expressions with that line.

Good and bad mingled in memory like spilled beads. Like beads, the colors stayed unmixed and sharp.

His face must have done something odd, because Marti's smile faded a bit. He grinned and shrugged, and finished, "If I say so myself, I give awesome breakfast."

Marti blinked. Her lips pressed together. She looked away.

"Okay, that didn't-- I wasn't trying to say...anything? Except about breakfast." Was there something he could add that wouldn't make matters worse?

She smiled and waved a hand, and didn't quite meet his eyes. "Most important meal of the day."

"Yeah." The silence was uncomfortable. Really, he should only talk to girls on-line. At least that way he could re-read his message before he hit "send." "Want dessert?"

She gaped at him. "You have room for dessert?"

"With help, maybe." Good. If he had to have a freak metabolism, the least it could do was help him change the subject. He slid the menu out from behind

the napkin holder and found the list of sweets. "Hey. Split an order of gulab jamun?"

"I have no idea what that is. Sure. I'll live dangerously." She rested her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands, smiling wide. The dimple showed in her cheek. Dimples ought to make a person look soft and helpless. This one didn't. This one was part of an expression that looked like, "Bring it, kid."

Chaz longed to ask, "Hey, want to learn to jump off a building?" just to see if he could get an industrial-size version of that expression. He ignored the impulse, and tried to squelch the pleasant increase in his heart rate. "You'll like it. At least, I *hope* you will. You're in no danger. Trust me."

Marti tilted her head--a coiling tendril of hair slid down across her forehead--and stared across the table at him. One corner of her mouth tugged higher than the other; it stretched and straightened the curve of her full lower lip.

If she opened her mouth, he thought he'd fall into it, he was so dizzy. But he was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to be. *A little social flirting, cowboy, not a freakin' invitation.*

To hide his confusion Chaz turned to the counter and waved, and ordered dessert when the waiter came over smiling. The waiter seemed to appreciate customers who took dinner seriously.

When he turned back, Marti was gazing across the room as if it went on several feet past what Chaz could see. "I wanted to be a teacher for a while. Law enforcement didn't even occur to me until after high school."

Subject change. He'd been right to ignore the dimple. "Ever have doubts?"

"I can't imagine being anything else."

"You said 'being,' not 'doing.'"

She looked puzzled. "Same thing?"

Chaz shook his head. "If you're only *doing* something, you can stop." He watched her attention turn inward as she thought about that. "So why the police?"

"You don't think you can change who you are?"

His lip hurt--oh, because he was biting it. He dropped his hands to his lap. Most of his anxiety tells were in his hands. "I think...you can be changed."

"Okay, maybe some people can't change, or won't. But I think most people don't change until they get that what they do affects other people. Until they take responsibility for that. Sometimes the only way that happens is if somebody with a badge shows up on their doorstep."

"You're the voice of conscience."

Marti shot him a look past her hair, as if she expected sarcasm. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's just that I like seeing what happens under the surface of the stuff people see every day. I want to make the world better for somebody. Maybe I picked a crappy way to do it. But isn't it better to have me in this job than somebody who wants to fuck around with people who can't fight back?"

"Yeah. It's...better to want to save the world."

Marti leaned forward, folding her arms on the table. "So you joined the Bureau."

He felt the blood burn under his face. He could back off, but she'd spot it. He didn't want her to think he was a coward. "You can't save everyone."

"I know."

"So did I," he said. "Intellectually."

The silence seemed long. "Bad beat?" she asked.

He looked up, startled. "It's...more like a streak."

She bit her lip, gave him an unconvincing smile, and looked away again. "I hate those. You get all the cards and you still go down. And if you can't do it when you've got all the cards, what does that say about you?"

It means you're not a superhero after all. It means you're just a poor struggling baseline human, in spite of your little jammer tricks. Only the monsters always get the job done. Somebody may stop them, but until then, the monsters accomplish what they set out to do.

Chaz swallowed against the feeling that his heart was beating its way up his throat. "The people I worked with-- They try to get to the crime before the

criminal does. To save the victim. To save other people from becoming victims." Below the tabletop, his hands struggled with each other. "But they know about the ones they don't get to in time, the ones they don't learn about until too late. So even when they win, they know...someday they could be the ones nobody gets to in time." He smiled, and realized his wasn't very convincing, either. "More fallout from a bad beat."

"You don't think it improves the odds, when you get to go in with a vest and a gun?"

Chaz thought of Falkner's determined juggling of two contradictory lives. Brady's one-night stands. Hafidha's brisk, cynical distance from her own wounds. Daphne's conviction that she was never quite as good as she needed to be. Todd's Zen-master detachment, and wherever it had come from. Lau's highly-polished armor, bright enough to fool the eye. Reyes--

Be fair. Reyes was hardly untouched by the work they did.

And Chaz Villette, who couldn't sleep or eat or get too far from his gun, who jumped at reflections. Who wondered if he'd know if he were a monster. "There's a lot gets past a vest," he said, short of breath.

"Is that why you're quitting?"

Chaz stared.

"Hello, third grade English. I know the difference between past and present tense."

"Then why did you say I was quitting, not that I'd quit?"

"Chaz, I followed you around all day, for God's sake. You haven't quit."

Rescue arrived in the form of the waiter with a little bowl and two spoons. Chaz pushed the bowl toward Marti. "Don't let them get cold."

Marti watched him for a moment more. He hoped that wasn't sympathy he was seeing. Then she sliced the side off one of the little brown balls in the dish, showing the creamy yellow underneath, and popped the spoon in her mouth.

"Oh my God," she said. "It's like a donut hole in syrup. And sort of like custard. Except it's totally not. That's amazing."

"Don't get any ideas about eating them all." He attacked one of the dough balls with his spoon.

"And even though you want to quit, you're hanging on as hard as you can," she said.

His spoon clinked against the bowl with the jerk of his hand. His mouth was full. So he raised his eyebrows.

"When I first asked you for help, if you'd said you'd quit the Bureau, you didn't have any pull with anybody, sorry, I'd have backed off. And you knew that."

Chaz swallowed. When he was sure he could speak lightly he said, "Nice work. D'you want my job?"

"Jesus, not for all the payouts in town." She stood up and pulled a skinny credit card wallet out of her hip pocket.

"Can I get half?

"I did the inviting. I pay the tab."

"Isn't that kind of old-fashioned?"

"In this I'm old-fashioned." She turned with one hand on her hip, and gave him the crooked smile that changed the shape of her mouth. "I make up for it elsewhere."

He shivered, and felt as if his nerve endings were brushing against each other like leaves in a wind. But weighing the conversation in his memory, he still didn't think it was the reaction she wanted out of him.

*

Chaz navigated to the nearest coffee shop with a drive-up. "I can find coffee anywhere in Las Vegas. It's some kind of coffee sonar. I can hear the beans grinding."

"Not bad for a guy who doesn't live here anymore."

He ordered a large, black, two sugars, and Marti's small decaf. "But I'm still *from* here. Being from Las Vegas-- It's part of my self-identification."

"You're staying in a hotel, though," she said, as if offering corroborating evidence.

He shrugged. "Did you know it would take 288 years for one person to spend a night in every hotel room in Las Vegas? Or that at last count, Nevada had one slot machine for every ten residents? Or that the hard hat was invented for workers building the Hoover Dam?"

"Aren't there supposed to be guys who fell into the wet cement and drowned, and their bodies are still in there?"

"Urban myth," Chaz said, unreasonably pleased. "There was no pour deeper than six inches at any time in the project."

"Oh, bummer."

"But see? I *am* from here. My brain is full of it." He slouched in the seat again, his feet on the dash, and waited for Marti to get Fluffy on a straight line through traffic before he sucked coffee through the go cup lid.

After Texas, and Johns Hopkins, after surgery and the NG tube and the relentless care of the hospital room, he was put on medical leave. When you're on medical leave, you go home. So he went to back to his apartment in Arlington, a cramped space in a building with no elevator, where he was too proud to ask for help carrying groceries or cleaning up or getting a ride to physical therapy.

The point of being released to go home was that home came with family and friends and an assist with the mechanics of recovery. Neither Las Vegas nor Arlington met that criterion. By those standards, he was a transient.

Still, when he needed someplace he knew, a place where he could manipulate the environment to suit his needs, he'd come here.

"Won't that keep you awake?" Marti nodded toward the cup.

He was holding it in both hands, like communion wine or the Grail. "Lots of things keep me awake. I don't think coffee is one of them, though." At the end of this drive was his hotel room, and a long night, and his face in the bathroom mirror again at the end of it. His reflection would want to know what had changed since the last time they'd met. He'd have to admit nothing had.

"What did you mean when you said you know where Ron's secret is?"

"The stressor--the thing that changed his behavior--happened when he was in Iraq. So I don't know what it is, but I know where it is in his life. Unfortunately, I can't get at his service records, but he told me his platoon. I may be able to find out more if I can talk to the people he served with." Ron had flinched when he mentioned them. Someone among them knew.

"You think it's something awful, don't you?"

"I know it's something Ron thinks is awful." Neither of them needed to say it out loud: that Ron's standard for awful wouldn't be exaggerated. "Whatever it is, Metro will take it seriously."

"Just what I was after." The note in her voice made him look, but he couldn't decide, from her voice or her face, what it meant. She nodded toward the dash. "Want some music?"

"Sure." She did, for whatever reason, and he was happy to let her have it.

"I had to add the stereo. It was Fluffy's only flaw, that she didn't play MP3-CDs." She tapped the power button on the stereo. A fading line of twangy guitar came out of the speakers, the end of a song. It occurred to him, too late, that he might hate her taste in music. He could stand it for the length of the ride.

Strings skipped, cheery and pizzicato, *bum bum bum bum ba-dum*, and fingers bounced out an addendum on the low end of a piano keyboard. Chaz flinched as Regina Spektor's knowing little-girl voice sang, *This is how it works / It feels a little worse / Than when we drove our hearse / Right through that screaming crowd...*

"Could we skip this one?" He had to push the words out through a rigid throat, thin and harsh over the engine noise and wind.

Marti poked the advance button and the pause. "Too ecto?"

"No, I like it. It--just reminds me of--of a friend."

Daphne loved that one. Chaz wondered if she knew how much it sounded like her. *You love until you don't, you try until you can't...* Honest in a way none of the rest of her teammates were, or maybe, could afford to be. Brave enough not to have to lie about the world.

He dragged himself out of his head to find they were at a stoplight, and Marti was watching him. "You're a minefield, Chaz Villette." The quirk of her mouth and eyebrows wasn't annoyance or pity or alarm, but in the the stammering light of a liquor store sign, he couldn't tell anything about it except what it wasn't.

Marti jabbed the controls again and cranked the volume. The speakers coughed out the rhythmic *chuk, chuk, chuk, chuk* of muffled guitar strings marking time.

Chaz snapped his head around to look at her. "That's--".

Then the piano and the guitars and *everything* came down on them in a four/four avalanche, and Zevon sang, "I went home with the waitress..."

Marti sang along with a rusty, untrained voice and absolute conviction. "Come on," she urged between lines.

"No, no. Bad idea."

"Come *on*. Next verse is yours."

Peer pressure. And he really didn't want her to think he was a coward.

He half-talked the first line (Warren Zevon's voice was lower than his). Marti's smile was a wide white beaming triangle lighting up her face, and the dimple was dark as a piece of night.

Oh, to hell with it. His breathy tenor was all wrong. But the song could hold its own even against him.

I took a little risk
Send lawyers, guns, and money
Yeah, get me out of this.

Hyah. Air punch. Absolute conviction.

His face hurt from singing while grinning while feeling as if he shouldn't grin at all. But he and Marti raised their voices in uncertain unison, filled in the hand claps over their heads at a red light. In that isolated slice of time, there was only as much past as he wanted to acknowledge, only the future he tagged as relevant.

"Regina Spektor to Warren Zevon--It's the 'Thirty Years of Irony' mix," Chaz said as it faded out.

"'Lawyers, Guns, and Money' is a classic. Like Beethoven. Ageless. Answer me this: I've never met anybody in law enforcement who doesn't love that song. Why?"

"I'll work up the profile and get back to you." Hafidha would be able to list every cover version ever recorded without having to look them up and would offer to burn him copies. Lau had probably done it for karaoke night. Of course Todd knew it; he'd never say so, but he'd probably *been* it. Daphne would know all the lyrics, but refuse to sing until after the second margarita. Falkner? She'd have to know it, since it was the theme song of her evil twin, if she had one. Brady would only sing along to it in the truck when he was alone.

Reyes was that guy. Once he must have taken that little risk. What did that say about him now?

In high school, the popular kids had posses. He hadn't had one, but he'd known what they were. They were made up of the people who got your jokes, the ones who had your back, the ones who called you on it when you let yourself down, the ones to whom you said the things you didn't think you could say out loud. And you were there to do those things for them. Together, they were the net that caught you when you fell off something too tall to survive.

You didn't stop needing them once you left high school. You didn't stop weaving the net. It was the reason you could carry your own bags, take out your own trash.

And when you needed to move a load too big for you, they expected you to say so.

Oh, he was such an idiot. He'd walked away instead.

"Did you like high school?" Chaz asked.

Marti spared him a quick frown. "Some of it. But anyone who says they're the best years of your life is on crack."

"I hated it. The last thing I wanted was do-overs on high school ten years later. Next thing I know, I'm working with the student council president, the

quarterback of the varsity football team, the editor of the paper, and god knows who else. And it's--I didn't mind at all." The wind snapped through his hair; a cascade of colored neon light splashed the Jeep's hood, the dash, his hands.

He was never the star of the movie. Except--soundtrack, lighting, location, co-star. He could almost believe he was. For once, it wasn't even a slasher movie. "And now I'm cruising around Las Vegas after dark in a ragtop Jeep with the coolest girl in school. I wish I could go back in time and tell myself about it."

The silence tipped him off, made him play back what he'd just said. Oh. Marti had both hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road. Streetlights rolled over her face like a slow-motion strobe, illuminating absolutely nothing. He started work on his apology.

Marti cranked the Jeep over to the curb at an angle that made Chaz grit his teeth and grab for the roll cage. She jammed the stick into neutral, yanked the emergency brake on, and shut off the engine.

A car passed next to them on the street, the sound of tires on asphalt outlining the silence rather than breaking it. His heart galloped. Marti's hands stayed on the wheel, her eyes front. He opened his mouth to say something--he had no idea what it would be.

Marti thumbed her seatbelt latch, leaned over, and kissed him on the lips.

She pulled back just enough to focus on his face. He ought to do something. He ought at least to know what the hell sort of expression he was wearing. But all he could do was sit very still and try not to interfere.

Whatever she saw in his face made her lean forward and kiss him again. *Oh, thank God.*

The seatbelt somewhat limited his ability to contribute. But his hands were free. He used them to make sure she didn't pull back again.

She did eventually, and he let her, but it didn't happen for a while. When it did, she sat back in the driver's seat, her breathing deep and quick. So was his. He ought to look away, give her that much privacy to recover in. But he couldn't. Her profile against the lit signs and windows across the street was perfectly clear, perfectly mysterious. He wanted her to turn toward him

again, so he could search for whatever it was he'd missed in the last two days that had led to this.

She turned, and he still didn't know. But in a faint, cracking voice, she said, "Want to make me breakfast?"

Oh. He nodded. "Yeah." It was barely loud enough to hear.

Marti started the Jeep and put it in gear, swung cautiously into traffic. They rode in awkward, highly-charged silence until Chaz remembered something even more awkward. "I should stop at a drug store," he croaked.

After a moment, Marti said, "I've got some."

Chaz glanced sideways and caught her doing the same. He coughed with trying not to laugh. "Do-overs on high school," he said. That made her laugh out loud, which pleased him and gave him the shivers, both at once.

He was strung up tight again by the time Marti parked in front of a row of angular two-story condos. He followed her up the front walk, stood on the step while she fumbled for the door key. Not too close. The world's folklore was full of wicked, dangerous things that had to be invited in. Then the door swung open, and she turned. Her eyes and parted lips and the angle of her head said it was true, he was a danger, but so was she, and if she was a little afraid, he could be, too.

He crossed the threshold.

He rarely touched another person intentionally. When he did, it meant something. In the dark of the entryway he cupped his hand around the curve of her face, and brushed his thumb along the spot where the dimple had appeared. She turned her head and kissed his palm. Her hair tickled his fingertips.

She curled her hand lightly around his wrist, stepped toward the stairs, and tugged. "Come on."

He followed her by the pull on his arm and the streetlights shining through the glass over the door. His heart fluttered hard in his chest, an unpleasant feeling. Too much like panic. He was nervous, but he wasn't afraid, was he?

Top of the stairs, down a short carpeted hall, into a bedroom that was all silver and contrast in the low light from the window. Marti pulled his face

down to hers and kissed him, and he opened his mouth and kissed her back. She made a soft, low noise in her throat and slid her hands down his chest to the buttons of his shirt.

Then Chaz remembered why he was afraid.

He stepped back, stumbled a little. "Wait. Wait," he panted. "There are--I have to tell you about...some things."

He swallowed hard, backed up until he felt the mattress against his calves, and sat down. Marti stood very still, where she'd been when he'd pulled away. Her face was determinedly blank. Her chest rose and fell, and he heard her breathing in and out, short and irregular.

"I told you I got--that I was hurt. When you asked about my back." What could he tell her? He met his father, who cut him open and may have made him HIV-positive, but he's dead now, so don't look and don't talk about it and it'll be fine? It wasn't fine. Marti stood with her hands at her sides, waiting to be hurt. The longer Chaz fumbled for words, the worse it would get.

"I got cut really badly on my back, five months ago. It still hurts. It still...it doesn't look good. And it was, the way it happened..." He shook his head hard. The scars on his wrists, like irregular beads on broken bracelets--he couldn't talk about them, even if she asked. "Also, there was blood-to-blood contact. Not just a needle stick. I was treated with antiretrovirals as soon as they could, and I've tested negative so far. But it's not sure."

"So you'd rather not," Marti said softly.

He lifted his head so fast it made him dizzy. He couldn't see her face well. "No-- Damn. It's just, if *you'd* rather not, I understand. And I...wanted to warn you about the scars, because I'm..." His mouth twisted in spite of him, and the voice of his new self said, *Good luck finding the right word for it.*

Marti bent her neck, tipping her head forward as if to see him better. "...Still a little freaked about them?"

It sounded so normal and ordinary when she said it. People got wounds, formed horrible scars, and were embarrassed and ashamed. Most of them weren't even Chaz Villette. It was nothing to be surprised at.

She crossed to the bed and sat beside him, her hip soft against his. "I'll be careful where I put my hands," she said, and her voice was low and hoarse.

She was careful. And thorough. In that artificial moonlight she undressed him and ran her palms and fingers over everything she uncovered: down his chest and belly between his bony hips, over his thighs, his buttocks, along the corrugations of his ribcage and the skin of his back, smooth or scarred. He tensed, shivering; but her hands were warm and light and didn't linger or rush, didn't suggest either staring or averted eyes. She leaned above him and kissed the back of his neck, under his hair. Her body heat crossed the little space between them like a touch. "Your turn," she whispered.

When he unfastened her bra and slid the straps down her arms, her breasts settled heavy against her pectoral muscles. He traced the creases beneath them, lifted them in his palms and watched their contours shift, circled her nipples with his thumbs. She arched her back and pulled air through her teeth in a hiss.

She stood to let him unfasten her jeans and push them and her underwear off the swell of her hips and down her thighs and calves. He'd studied the undulating line of calf and thigh in the Riviera bar, admired, but hadn't let himself think about warm, smooth skin over cushioning fat and taut muscle. Her stomach was rounded, hard underneath its padding. He trailed his fingers down it, brushed lightly over the dark tangle of her pubic hair. The sound she made was half-purr, half-growl.

She flexed her fingers in his hair and ducked her head to kiss him, folded up next to him. He leaned backward and pulled her down with him across the sheets.

They were slow for as long as they could be: readers with a book they didn't want to finish. Sometimes they were awkward, until they learned what they needed to. When they couldn't be slow anymore, they were whatever they had to be, and Chaz, at least, lost track of grace, awkwardness, confidence, uncertainty, everything but what *felt*. Marti flexed against him like a bent bow and gave a rough, muted wail and suddenly what he felt was more than he could bear. If he made a noise, he couldn't hear it, or forgot to listen.

He didn't quite doze afterward. Marti did, he thought; but while his body was still stunned and heavy, his brain began to come back on line. He let it do as it pleased.

What pleased it was revisiting everything Marti had said or done since he'd met her in Kady's, in light of, well, where he was at the moment.

Marti stirred, rested her chin on one hand, and contemplated his face. She turned a curl of his too-long hair around one finger and studied that, her expression blank and her thoughts turned inward.

If he had any sense, he'd leave them there.

Do not start. Even you won't be able to clean up the resulting mess. Even you aren't that stupid. He did it anyway. "What did you think, when you saw me in the coffee shop night before last?"

She frowned, just the little vertical line between her brows. "What?"

"Were you surprised?"

"Yeah." It sounded like the truth.

"Since I got here that night, I've talked to four people who knew me from high school. Only one of them recognized me: you. How did you know what I looked like, Marti?"

Her eyes dropped. "You don't look all that different."

He could make a joke and the subject would disappear. He stayed silent.

She flushed and pulled away. "So, you keep your secrets and everybody else gives up theirs? Is that the program?"

It was, in a nutshell. Too late to back off now.

"Fine." She glared into his eyes from two feet away, a distance transformed from intimate to alarming in a matter of seconds. "You were my crush."

"Pardon?" But it was so unlikely, it almost had to be true.

"You were smart, though you pretended you weren't, and kind of crazy, and all the stuff a sixteen-year-old kid should be afraid of didn't seem to scare you." She raised one shoulder, looked away, her mouth hard. "I got over it. But I noticed whenever you showed up in the paper or I heard something about what you were up to. Once I went to work in Metro, it seemed like FBI and BAU connections came up on my radar every other day."

He shook his head. "Not with photos..."

"So I went looking." Her voice broke. "Jesus, it's like I have a guilty conscience about it. News services run photos and video on high-profile cases. You bring scumbags into police stations with their coats over their

heads, you stand in the background at press conferences. Did you think you were invisible?"

He had thought he was, even before he could actually make it happen. The idea that, going about his job, he could be noticed by anyone outside it made him feel like a vampire catching sight of itself in a mirror.

"So, yeah. At the end of a week of stakeouts and warrants and raids and still not quite nailing the big dogs, I saw you sitting in Kady's at two-thirty in the morning. You looked like you'd had the shit repeatedly kicked out of you and did not *care*. It was like the world was apologizing for my crappy week by dropping you in front of me. And I wanted--" She closed her eyes and swallowed. "I got weak in the knees. Literally. I wanted to peel you like an onion." Air came out past her lips in an almost-laugh. "Now here you are, stark naked in my bedroom. But I swear to God, you're still wearing that jacket and tie."

It took him a second to figure that out. He wanted to apologize, but it seemed as if the things he should apologize for had happened too long ago. "Spies are told not to have sex with someone they want to get to open up." He pushed a tendril of hair away from her eyes with one finger. She didn't pull away.

"Learn that at Quantico?"

"No," he admitted. He hadn't imagined, when she led him in the front door, that what he'd be feeling right now was sorrow. Or that, in spite of it, he'd want her to attempt to peel away another layer. He outlined her ear with the same fingertip, used it to trace the arches of her lips. They opened to let in an unsteady breath.

He laced his hands together behind her head and drew her face down to his. "Keep trying," he whispered against her mouth.

She did. Whether she revealed any more of him, he wasn't sure, but the attempt was infinitely worthwhile in other ways. And for Chaz, at least, it produced black and dreamless unconsciousness.

An unfamiliar cascade of tinny notes broke it. He flung out a hand and found a nightstand that wasn't his with no cell phone on it. His phone didn't sound like--no, his new one did. The ring came again, muffled, and he remembered

the phone was in his pants pocket, and his pants were on the floor of someone else's bedroom. That woke him up.

He hung over the edge of the bed and groped, found the right sort of fabric under his hand, rummaged until he came up with the phone. Beside him, Marti raised her head. The number wasn't one he knew. He thumbed the answer button. "Hello?"

"Wake you up? I bet you sleep like a fuckin' baby."

"Who is this?" But he knew.

"We got so we didn't sleep at all. Stay awake, stay alive. Then I get home and find the whole goddamn world took over by shits like you."

He wanted it to be another nightmare, but he knew better. "Ron, where did you get this number?" He'd given it to three people since he arrived. One was lying next to him. The other two were in danger. He knew, because he'd named them in the bar.

"I wish I'd killed you. I still could. What d'you say, Chaz? You think the Feds could get to me before I get to you?"

"Where are you, Ron?" In the light that filtered through the blinds, Chaz could see Marti, her eyes wide, the receiver of the bedside phone in her hand, ready to hit buttons.

"Why the fuck do you care? You're not gonna get there in time."

The room wasn't warm enough. No room could be. He stared at Marti. "Let Angela go." Marti punched in the number, turned away. "You know this is my fault. Let her go, Ron, and you can come after me."

Ron's laugh sounded in his ear, staccato like crumpling paper. "I don't have to choose." The signal cut off.

Marti rattled Angela's address into the bedside phone. "The bastard may still be there. Hurry."

Chaz was half dressed by the time she hung up. "Take me with you."

She only paused a moment. Then her mouth did something that was almost a smile under the circumstances. "Never figured otherwise."

Act V

By the time they reached Downtown, they knew that Angela's back door had been found forced and open, and the house was empty. No one mentioned a copy of *People* with a piece torn from the cover, but Chaz knew it was there somewhere.

The station was focused chaos, crowded and noisy and purposeful. In the middle of the room, Baxter looked up from his cell phone. Polo shirt and jeans; he'd been off the clock when the call came. Chaz decided he liked him.

"You were right," Baxter said as soon as he saw Marti.

Marti's shoulders hiked, and she looked away.

"We'll get her back," said Baxter. Chaz liked him even more.

Map. There had to be a map. There, on the back wall. Chaz got to it, slid his fingers across it: Ellen Shayle's apartment; Angela's house. "What's Ron's address?" he asked.

When no one answered, he looked over his shoulder. Baxter was frowning, which made Chaz take quick stock of himself. His shirt was wrinkled, untucked, open at the collar and showing at the hem of his jacket. His hair wasn't combed. But he was decent enough for the middle of the night in a town that hadn't balked at Howard Hughes.

Marti looked dazed. "Ron's address," Chaz repeated.

Marti told him. He found it on the map. Ellen Shayle was closer by almost half the width of the city; it wasn't about opportunity.

"What are you doing?" Marti asked, from near his right shoulder.

"Geographic profile. Sort of. Not enough data. What does Ron drive?"

"2003 GMC panel van, dark blue. He's a contract driver for a restaurant supply warehouse."

"No other vehicles?"

She shook her head.

"He can't get far off-road in that. Lieutenant Baxter, do we know if the van's gone from his address?"

"Yeah. APB on it already."

Chaz stared at the map, begging it to tell him something else. There was something else, he was sure. Ellen Shayle there, Ron Shayle there, Angela Alcantar over there, then the sprawl of new developments, the desert, the foothills.

"The van...gives him room," he said. Not giving the profile, just thinking aloud. The people he wanted to think aloud to weren't there, but he did it anyway. "That makes up for the places he can't go in it. And Ron is disorganized, running on rage and impulse; he doesn't have an isolated bolt hole prepared. The van is where he'd feel safest. Angela will be bound, because he wants her conscious, to punish her."

"Unless she's already dead," Marti said, flat-voiced.

And on her way to a dump site. Chaz shot Baxter a pleading look.

"Signs of a struggle at the house," Baxter replied. "No blood."

No help, no help. Ron would use his hands, he'd make the end personal. For Ron, physical strength had always been the measure of his value. Chaz couldn't look at Marti.

Baxter's phone rang. He answered, listened, hung up. "Choppers are up."

"He's dodged mortars in Iraq. He'll be good at this."

Marti pulled a folding chair up to a desk and grabbed a legal pad. "I'll give you the people I know that Ron hangs with, boss. Maybe one of 'em knows someplace--a place he'd go."

Why, Chaz thought. *It's in the why*. Near the door, a square-faced, black-haired woman in a blue t-shirt hunched over a keyboard and a twenty-inch monitor. Chaz threaded swiftly through the room until he stood by the square-faced woman's chair. The Metro I.D. clipped to the neck of her shirt read, *Nizhoni, Charlotte*.

"Chaz Villette, FBI," he said.

She raised dark eyes to his, and her skeptical expression said, *You better not be wasting my time, boy.* Chaz opened his mouth to ask her if she could access Ron's Marine Corps records, though he already knew the answer.

Then something, or several somethings, fell into a new shape in his brain. New patterns. The dates of Ron's deployment. The victimology. Whoever Ron had served with.

The victim profile had changed by the time Ron came back from Iraq. Angela wasn't the first.

Breathless, his voice skidding upward, he said, "I need a search. Iraq, Marines, a crime against a woman, probably Iraqi. They weren't convicted. Three, maybe four men, probably a fire team. It would have been--would have been a, a serious assault, a rape-murder, something like that." He rattled out the dates, Ron's platoon.

Long before he finished Nizhoni was keying. "No point in checking *Stars and Stripes*?" she asked, desert-dry.

"Probably not."

As she typed, her screen filled and changed and filled, so like Hafidha's. He was breathing too fast and too shallow, but it wasn't phobic. It was the headlong rush of knowledge.

"This could be it," said Nizhoni.

On the screen, a report from Al Jazeera's English-language site on the rape and murder of a civilian Iraqi woman.

On the screen, a photo of Ron Shayle with three men Chaz had never seen, all in service uniform, walking into a sunbaked building past a pair of MPs. The first in line was the tallest, handsome, walking with his chin up and smiling into the camera. The other three weren't smiling, and their heads were bent. Ron was second from last in the line. Ron's fire team, leader first, on their way to face the military inquiry that would dismiss the charges. None of the men were named.

On the screen, a photo of a dark-eyed, black-haired, smiling woman. Roba Bahjat. She leaned on the shoulder of someone cropped out of the frame. She wore Western clothes.

She wore earrings, lapis in filigree gold.

Nizhoni tilted her head up and back to stare at him. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I need a printout of that." He pointed at the photo of the woman. "A color printout."

"You got it." Nizhoni tapped, and a printer two desks over growled and clacked.

Chaz grabbed the sheet out of the hopper and shot back across the room. "I have to get to Ron's mother's place."

"She'll be asleep," Marti said.

"I'll wake her up. Can you take me?"

She looked to Baxter, who nodded. She turned back to Chaz. "Let's go."

*

Chaz knocked on the apartment door. Nothing. So he pounded. Nothing. He pounded again. Down the outdoor hallway with its other apartments, a light came on in a window, a door opened with the chain fastened.

"She won't answer," Marti whispered.

From Ellen Shayle's apartment Chaz heard a sound, a scratch. "Mrs. Shayle, it's Chaz Villette!" he shouted through the closed door. "Please, I need to talk to you."

He closed his eyes and willed her to listen. The deadbolt clunked. The door opened to the end of the chain.

The air had the same powdery smell of air freshener and carpet cleaner. A clean apartment, clean of history. Clean of any taint.

He'd read it wrong. Ellen Shayle lived in a fortress of cleanliness, of order. But the fortress only had room for her in it.

Ron hadn't turned away from his mother. *She'd* rejected *him*.

She peered through the three-inch opening. She was still dressed. A fellow insomniac. She clutched the collar of her sweater to her throat, and the lapis earrings trembled on their wires. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Mrs. Shayle, I need to know where Ron would go if he were on the run. His wife's--Angela's life--he has her, and he's going to hurt her if we don't find him."

"My Ron wouldn't--"

"Mrs. Shayle, you lied to me. You saw Ron after he got back from Iraq. He came to you. He told you about a terrible thing he'd done. You shut him out of your life. It was Ron you were talking about when you said he took your son away from you, not your husband. Ron did a terrible thing, and you couldn't forgive him. Your son wouldn't do that. So it wasn't your son who came back from Iraq."

"I'm not going to talk to you." Her shoulder moved.

He jammed his right foot in the door before she could slam it.

Marti, her face gray in the security lights overhead, said, "Mrs. Shayle, this is a police matter now. Don't make us come back with a warrant. We want to find Ron before it's too late to help him."

"I haven't seen or heard from Ron. Not since he went over there," Ellen Shayle said, her voice shaking.

Chaz took the printout from his jacket pocket, unfolded it. "Mrs. Shayle, I know you have." He held the picture of the dead Iraqi woman up to the opening.

Ellen Shayle stared at the photo. Her face came apart as he watched. Her hands went to her earlobes, jerked away, and one lobe, torn, began to well blood. She threw the earrings out the door. They pattered on the concrete, skittered under the railing and over the edge.

"I didn't know," she whispered. "I didn't know they were hers."

"Please, Mrs. Shayle," Chaz begged. "Tell us where Ron might be."

A drop of blood fell on her sweater. Her eyes filled up, overflowed, and she turned her ruined face up to Chaz and shook her head. "I don't know."

When she closed the door this time, Chaz didn't try to stop her.

He stumbled down the stairs to the first floor, to the sidewalk and the curb and the Jeep. The printout was still in his hand. He stuffed it into his pocket.

"He gave his *mother* her earrings?" Marti's voice was higher than usual, unsteady.

"They were a trophy he didn't want. He had to take them, just as he had to--to take part in the kill. He gave them to his mother as part of cleansing himself. He thought she was... In his eyes, she could grant absolution. 'To forgive, divine.' When he found out she--she was just human, after all, he... Women weren't sacred anymore."

"So. Angela."

Chaz nodded. "He wanted her to prove him wrong, but there was no way she could help him. He couldn't talk to her, and she couldn't read his mind."

"They'll find him," Marti said. He wasn't sure if she was reassuring herself or him. "He can't get away."

Ron had gotten away with so much. Someone should have told on him long ago. Chaz should have done it.

But Chaz wasn't the only one. He *couldn't* have been; Ron knew what he was doing by the time he went after Chaz. It was a script by then. That was why Ron had been afraid of him, in the bar: because Chaz had been the last one. The one Ron hadn't been able to terrorize, humiliate, control. The one who escaped.

"Marti. I need a map. High-res, U.S. Geological Survey, Nevada Gazetteer--something that shows mining roads, BLM access roads--"

She was digging under the driver's seat before he stopped talking. She handed him a USGS topo map and a flashlight.

He tried to keep his hand steady, but his finger trembled as it traced its way from Angela's house in a neighborhood of cramped printed-circuit streets, north along highway 95 (shivering in t-shirt and jeans, only emerging to stick his thumb out for the semis with their high headlights), then north and east below the dunes, along the colored thread of an unpaved road at the edge of state land (stumbling against the signpost, cutting his hand on the bloomed-out edge of a bullet hole in the stamped metal).

On the map, it was a hairline of blue. He remembered it as a rutted dirt track past the buildings of a sand and gravel company, long abandoned. He'd climbed halfway up the ruins of the conveyor ladder, rusted metal groaning and flaking away under his sweating hands, thinking about broken bones and

tetanus and dying alone in the dark. The glow of the valley lights silhouetted Gass Peak like a frozen sunrise.

When the Camaro roared past in a shower of stones, the driver hadn't thought to look higher than the side of the road.

Chaz was the one who'd escaped, who'd made it back. So he was the one who knew the route.

But he hadn't gone to the end of the road. That was the point of breaking the trunk latch, the point of braving the roll over the back bumper and the drop to the iron-hard dirt when the car slowed for a turn in the darkness. He hadn't gone to the end. And the hairline on the map branched, three ways, beyond what he knew.

One branch ran to the abandoned gravel pit. It felt right. It *was* right. The quarry would contain whatever happened there, rising like bleachers for a secret audience. There might be water at the bottom. There would be loose rock, to hide the evidence. The dark wall of the mountains would stand between Ron and the lights of the city, but he'd still see the glow. All that power, and not enough to stop him.

"There." He jabbed his finger down on the map. "Call Baxter. He's taking her there."

*

It looked different in the headlights, from the seat of the Jeep, from years away. But he was still surprised it didn't frighten him. He remembered what he'd felt at the time, but all that was left was memory.

Marti shot into the turn for the quarry road, rear wheels sliding. Barely a track: all rock and ruts, just drivable in a street-ready car. At the speed they were going, it was just drivable in a Jeep. Fluffy leaped and tilted. Chaz grabbed the roll cage with both hands and shut his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Marti asked.

"I'm trying not to remember the rollover statistics for a Jeep Wrangler."

"Fluffy's not that kind of girl."

He opened his eyes, peered ahead into the night beyond the headlights. A glow of other lights against the black shape of the mountain. "There!"

"Got it." She sped up. It still felt too slow.

The blue panel van sat like scenery on a stage, lit by the headlights and battery-run spots of squad cars and the SWAT vehicle. The van's side cargo door was slid open a hand's width, for a view or a clear shot, but showed nothing of the inside. Behind the van was darkness and the drop-off into the quarry. If Ron had thought of that for an endgame, at least he hadn't used it yet.

Chaz half-fell out of the Jeep, aware that Marti was doing the same. The rest of the players had just arrived. The SWAT team was checking weapons, light glancing off their helmets. Uniforms crouched by cars and pulled on ballistic vests. More lights behind him--what looked like two paramedic units coming up the road.

He spotted the signs of a command post coming together by one of the county vans and loped over. Two Metro cops turned to watch him, frowning, and the SWAT team leader gave him a baffled look. A copper-faced man in uniform and captain's insignia jerked his head up and glared at Chaz. "Who the fuck--"

Baxter stepped out of the dark. He had a vest over his polo shirt. "It's okay, Lou. He's the Fed who got us the location. Special Agent Charles Villette, Captain Luis Ochoa."

Chaz had forgotten, until Ochoa looked up, that he really had no business there. He'd heard that greyhounds and Thoroughbreds would run by instinct, too.

Ochoa eyed him again, smothered a snort. "Our guy's holed up in the van." He pointed with his chin at an officer with a bullhorn talking into a car radio. "We gave him the speech, but he's not budging. I'm going on the assumption that he's armed, that he's got the woman in there, and she's still alive. But he's got no reason to shoot anybody the fuck up. We'll wait him out. He's got to know he won't be sleeping in his own bed tonight, but unless he's a lower-functioning whacko than it sounds, he won't do anything that'll get him SBC'd."

Suicide by cop. Chaz had a sudden, vivid mental picture of how that would play out, and resolved to prevent it at any cost. "Ron Shayle and three other men committed the gang rape and murder of a civilian woman in Iraq. He

brought that home. That's why he's here. He's likely to escalate and kill his hostage and himself. The only reason he doesn't have an endgame is because he's disorganized and reactive, and hasn't had a chance to think that far ahead. If you try to wait him out, you'll give him that chance."

Ochoa stared as if Chaz had grown an extra head, but not as if he didn't believe him.

Chaz looked out at the spotlit van. History of family violence. Stressor: torture and murder as a bonding ritual. Trigger...

Trigger: Chaz Villette. Something would have driven Ron across this line eventually. It happened here, now, because Chaz had crowded Ron off his precarious balance.

"Jimmy says you're BAU," Ochoa said. "Got any good tricks for getting Shayle out of there?"

Marti came up out of the darkness. Baxter met her, put a hand on her shoulder. "We're pretty sure she's in there. We don't know anything else."

Marti nodded. "I heard. Talked to the guys on my way up." She was wearing a ballistic vest; she must have got it out of one of the cars. Her eyes were huge in her tight-drawn face. She caught Chaz's eye, and he recognized the plea she sent him.

"I'll see what I can do," Chaz said to Ochoa.

"Put your damned vest on," he said.

"I...don't have one."

"He's on vacation," Baxter added, sounding apologetic.

"Find an extra someplace. Jesus." Ochoa headed off toward the edge of the circle.

"I don't think he likes you," Marti said. The ghost of a laugh in her voice made his throat hurt.

The SWAT van provided. He shrugged out of his corduroy jacket, and the SWAT driver smirked and handed him the vest. "Know how to put this on?"

Chaz nodded and dropped it over his shoulders. He loosened the strap of his belt pouch so it would fit around the vest, snugged up the Velcro around his

ribs, and tossed his jacket on the front seat of the van. It was strange to look down at his chest and see the wrong letters reflecting the headlights. No time to think about it. Showtime.

He penetrated the armored line around the van and found himself crouched next to Ochoa. "Ready," he muttered. He wasn't sure of that, but it sounded good. He could hear his heartbeat inside his ears, feel his lungs working too hard.

Ochoa was silent beside him. Then he said, "Tell me if we're gonna get this guy alive."

"Pardon?" An instant later he understood, and was queasy.

"If one of my guys gets the shot, do I tell him to take it?"

"*No*." Chaz had seen the mad dogs, the ones with whom there was no option but to take the shot. And the gammas. *At least I don't have to try to explain* that *to Ochoa.* No, Ron was still human. "If he comes into the open..."

"Then we'll reassess." Ochoa jerked his head toward the van. "Do whatever the hell you do." Ochoa began to murmur into his radio link.

Chaz considered the options. He could shout, but it would sound thin, weak, unofficial. The bullhorn would have authority, but less intimacy, less humanity. Face to face was best, a phone next after that, but it would have to be the bullhorn. He needed to say--

No. Of course not. He wasn't the voice of authority, *he was the trigger*.

The borrowed vest weighed on his shoulders. He looked down at the white block letters, meant to be visible in streetlight, moonlight, anything but total darkness. No, not the voice or face or body of authority, no rank, no power.

Show him what he expects to see. Even if it's true.

Chaz began to rip at the Velcro tabs.

"What the fuck--" Ochoa said behind him.

Chaz pulled the vest over his head. His shirt glowed in the reflected lights. Like the letters, but writing a different message. The cold night air breathed down his open collar, pierced the cloth to his skin.

"Put the goddamn vest back on before--"

And the belt pouch. The pistol inside tugged heavy at his waist, and the weight itself made him feel stronger. That was why he had to take it off. He felt a miserable little noise trying to climb up his throat. He swallowed it, clicked the buckle open before he could stop himself, and handed the vest and pouch to Ochoa.

No one on the team would let him do this. Brady would knock Chaz down before he'd let him walk out there without the vest. They'd be furious if they heard about it.

Especially if they heard about it at his funeral.

"I'm going to draw him out. Tell your guys to hold their fire, and to move in and grab him as soon as-- As soon as they can."

He crouched and scrambled back from the line, back to the outside of the perimeter of vehicles. That rim was studded now with the irregular, angular silhouettes of rifles like fingers pointed at the van. One of the SWAT team turned as he scrambled past, and Chaz saw the sneer under his helmet. Ah, yes, this was open to misinterpretation. Not his problem.

When he reached the end of the line of vehicles, he stopped to catch his breath. The position was good; Ron could focus on Chaz or the police, but not both. He needed Ron to think of him as separate from the headlights and the guns.

The edge of the quarry was maybe twenty feet away to his right. Chaz couldn't tell how steeply it dropped off. Stay away from it, and he'd never need to know.

He raked his fingers through his tangled hair. Tidy enough in the dark, maybe. Tidy enough for a desk jockey, a Washington soldier, no sand in his teeth or blood on his hands. He rubbed his eyes, pressed the bridge of his nose until it hurt. Then he focused on the van, made himself hard and smooth and shining to catch the reflection of the man inside.

He was afraid. Afraid, and hating it, hating anything that made him frightened. Grind those things down, and he was safe. He was small. Make sure they knew they were smaller.

He stepped forward almost to the edge of the light, feeling as if someone else was inside his body. The hardpan felt different under his feet. His

fingers curled and straightened and stayed straight, rigid with that churning mix of fear and hate.

Chaz Villette had made Ron do this. Chaz Villette was a sneak, a coward who never got within reach, who never missed a chance to hamstring better men so he could pass them up, slip off with what they should have had, get away with everything. Chaz Villette, taking a government paycheck to pry into other people's business.

It was true, because Ron believed it. Hate was a sour taste in the back of Chaz's mouth, hate for *himself*. He accepted it. He wrapped himself in Ron's vision of Chaz Villette. He concentrated on being someone whose hands wouldn't shake, whose voice would carry with self-righteousness, who would sneer at people like Ron Shayle.

It would be easy to show Ron his own reflection. But the reflection Ron needed to see was of the Chaz Villette in his head.

Speak the right words in the right voice. The wrong ones would get people killed.

"Ron! It's Special Agent Villette. Come out of the van."

Muttering ran through the line of cops. Shut them out. Beneath his notice.

"Ron?" He let the pause build a little. "Yeah, that's what I thought." His voice was harsh, scratchy, unreliable. In his own ears it was maddening, like a buzzing fly that kept coming back.

Silence from the van. Then Ron's voice: "What?"

"I figured you were too much of an ass to come out."

A bark of bitter laughter. "Still think you know every fuckin' thing. How about you come over here, Mister Ef Bee fucking Eye?"

Never get within reach. Never miss a chance to hamstring the bastards and run.

"Is this how you do it in the Corps? Hole up in the bunker and and tell each other how great you are until someone else figures out a way to rescue your asses? Oh, Semper Fi, man."

"Shut the fuck up."

"You're a war hero, huh? *Look* at you. Squatting in your delivery truck while a bunch of poor underpaid bastards stay up all night watching you do it. Yeah, they're putting you on the recruiting posters." Angela was in there. Alive, he hoped. Don't remind Ron that she was a weapon he could use.

"I was there, God damn it. You don't know shit."

"Ron. I'm an FBI special agent. You drive a *delivery truck*. What's to know?"

His voice didn't weaken the horrible words. It made them worse. Because they were true, weren't they? Ron was losing at life, and Chaz was *happy* about it.

Or was that the reflection of Chaz, Ron's image of him? How many monsters did the mirror show?

No response from Ron. Push him. Let one monster speak to another.

"In Iraq you crawled for somebody else. Just like you used to make other people crawl. You did everything he told you, didn't you? You and the rest of the fire team. You finally came up against somebody bigger than you. And you caved." More truth, clear and dreadful in the mirror. "When the four of you kidnapped the woman in Iraq, when you raped her and murdered her, Ron, did you have the spine to object even once?"

Not everyone in the circle of armor around the van had heard about that. The rustle of reaction made it through Chaz's altered state.

"I didn't want--"

"But you were too scared to refuse, weren't you? And now you're scared of *me*. How's that going to play at the next high school reunion, Ron? I know I'm going to feel pretty good about it."

Ron gave a whine of rage, like a chained dog. "You got cops with guns backing you so you can run your fuckin' mouth. You got a gun, so you think you can bring it on me. You skinny little faggot!"

Now. Or never, and he was dead. Chaz stepped forward into the light. His hands were at his sides, fingers spread. "No gun. Am I supposed to be afraid of you, Ron? Remind me why."

"You fuckin' smug faggot son of a bitch--"

"Ron! Which of us is *hiding in the God-damned van*?"

He must have blinked. He must have been too deep in reflected identity to see out his own eyes. The van door was open.

Chaz felt a blow like a cannonball in his chest. At the back of his skull, pain shot his vision full of clots of light and dark. His back hit something hard, sharp, rough. He wanted to howl but his lungs were empty, and nothing was coming down his throat.

He saw Ron's twisted face close above his own, felt Ron's hands at his windpipe and his own fingernails digging hard into Ron's fingers. He let go and slammed both palms over Ron's ears.

Ron shrieked, lost his grip, jerked out of reach. Chaz got his knee up and levered. He rolled away as Ron pitched sideways.

Noise, shouting, running feet, metal on metal. Other people around them--it seemed like dozens. Chaz lay in the dirt and hoped they didn't step on him. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to think.

Someone--two someones--helped him sit up. He began to shake, from adrenaline and shock and the desert night cold that he'd ignored until then, and the amount of his personal candle he'd just burned. Something tickled the back of his head and neck, like bugs crawling down his scalp under his hair.

His vision was clearing; he could see the van. A paramedic team bustled around the door, lifting out--Angela. Alive. Whatever the damage was, she was alive. She was crying shrilly as they laid her on the stretcher.

Bright light in one eye. Oh--another paramedic. Someone draped something around his quaking shoulders. Someone parted the hair on the back of his head, probed--ow.

"Cut on a rock when he went down, looks like. Maybe a stitch or two."

Someone handed him a vacuum bottle cap of hot coffee, wrapped his vibrating fingers around it, helped him get it to his lips. He smelled the sugar in it, saw the sheen of fat from the cream. Who had thought to bring coffee to a hostage crisis? Brilliant. He managed to swallow more than he spilled. The heat loosened his throat, fought the shakes from the inside.

He hated this. He'd won the game and ought to be able to enjoy it, but there was his body reminding him and everyone in sight that he was frail and frightened and mortal.

But he'd bought two lives. A fair return for a little humiliation.

"Thank you," he croaked, and handed the cup back. One of the paramedics took it, a dark, heavy-built man. The other, a woman with shaggy blonde hair and a long, thin mouth, had the penlight.

"Hold still, will you?" she ordered, and thumbed his other eyelid up.

"You okay, bro?" Chaz recognized the voice of the SWAT van driver. The thing draped over his shoulders, he realized, was his jacket.

"He'll answer that as soon as I tell him what to say," the blonde paramedic replied absently.

Chaz tried to laugh. Instead he coughed, and everything hurt. He wanted to tell her she reminded him of someone.

Ochoa crouched on the dirt next to him. "That was fun. Especially the part when I thought I was going to have to explain how a Federal agent got his fucking head blown off while I sat and watched." He handed Chaz his belt pouch. Chaz managed not to clutch it to his chest like a teddy bear.

He licked his lips. "Sorry." It still hurt to talk, though not to breathe.

"Do all you BAU guys scare the crap out of people, or is it just you?"

"It's...universal." Among his teammates, at least.

Ochoa looked out at the van, still spotlit, overrun by the crime scene team. "Two automatic rifles, a .45 caliber Glock, a big-ass Desert Eagle, and a fuckin' double-action sixgun, maybe just in case he met up with Billy the Goddamn Kid. And enough ammo to take out the buffet at the Mirage at dinnertime. And you said he didn't have an endgame."

Chaz shivered, not from adrenaline or shock. "Can't be right every time."

Ochoa turned his impassive face back to Chaz. "You ever need anything, call me. Anybody here'll say the same."

It's okay, he thought, fighting back another cough. *Statute of limitations. There might be a speeding ticket someday, though*.

The blonde paramedic came back from wherever she'd disappeared and squatted in front of him. "No concussion. But you still get to meet my friend Mr. Emergency Room."

Chaz nodded, carefully because of the hurt and the whatever-it-was stuck to the back of his head, and let her and Ochoa help him to his feet. He managed to not look unstable, so they let him walk to the ambulance unsupported.

Fifteen feet off the ambulance's bumper, two cops held Ron, cuffed, while a third opened the back door of a cruiser. Ron stood with his head hanging, the way he'd walked in the photo of the fire team. A small-time predator who found out, too late and too close, what a big-time predator looked like. Ron would testify. They could find the other three men, particularly the one who'd smiled into the camera. But Ron was broken, and nothing would ever really fix him.

Ron raised his head suddenly, as if Chaz had spoken. His face was like wax, blank and empty until the heat of rage melted it. "Don't you fucking pity me!" he screamed at Chaz, and the uniforms on either side jerked him back.

Ron was right. It didn't help, and it wasn't fair.

All the monsters were born from some point of fracture. But Chaz had known this one before he broke, been there before the result became inevitable. Some part of the weight of Ron's ruin settled on Chaz's shoulders. He evaluated it. Not too much to carry. He felt his own expression shift, from sympathy into something neutral and still.

Game face. So that was where it came from, and what it felt like. Well.

Ron closed his eyes and let himself be stuffed into the cruiser.

Chaz stood with his feet braced against a tendency to wobble and the effect of the web of flashing blue and red lights on his vision. The other ambulance stood open and glowing across the way, the space between crisscrossed by passing uniformed people. Some of them acknowledged Chaz, a single dip of the chin. He'd seen Falkner get that, and Brady, and Reyes. It looked strange from straight on.

At the rear of the ambulance, Marti stood by the gurney and held Angela's hand, smoothing her hair back before the EMTs slid the frame over the

bumper. Chaz seemed to have lost his own minders temporarily, so there was no one to protest when he walked over.

The ambulance doors closed, and Marti turned to see him watching. She stepped toward him carefully, as if the ground were spongy.

"I'm going to follow them in," she said. She was hoarser than he was. "To be there--"

Chaz nodded. "I've--" He tipped his head toward the other ambulance. "--got a ride. You go."

She swallowed, and her gaze bounced off him. "Thank you."

The people she loved were mortal. It was possible that, next time, help would come too late. The knowledge was new and raw, and she wanted to refuse it, but that wasn't how it worked. And it wouldn't improve anything if he put that into words.

"Call me," she added. "When they're done with you."

"I-- Okay."

She would see worse than this; it was the nature of the job. But if she was lucky, it would never be so personal again. "Marti, don't--"

What? Break? He knew how useful that was to say. Be in a position where you could be broken? Anyone could be, anywhere, any time. Nobody believed it until it happened to them.

She peered up at his face, maybe reading something in it. Blue, red, blue, red across her cheek, as if it changed from cold to hot and back again. He reached out one shaky hand to see. Her skin was warm under his fingertips, which meant his fingers were as cold as he'd been afraid they were.

"Just...be lucky, okay?"

He thought she might have understood, a little. "It's Las Vegas," she replied, and the fracture in her words could have been a shot at laughter. "Everybody's lucky."

*

When the ER staff let him go, Chaz was at least presentable. He had a Steri-Strip under his hair, and the blood was rinsed out of it and off the back of his

neck. The stains on his shirt collar and the rest of the dirt were hidden by his jacket. He was glad he'd taken off the jacket; he was low on presentable sport coats already.

He walked out into daylight, the kind of clear autumn morning that brought tourists to Las Vegas, and which hardly any of them ever saw, even from a hotel room window. The palms rattled in a rise of wind. When it dropped, the blackbirds hidden in the fronds went back to arguing.

He spotted a cab at the end of the hospital's circle drive. Under the circumstances, he felt he was entitled to spring for a cab. He took three strides toward it before he realized he had no idea where he was going.

He was living at the Riviera. Most of his significant belongings were in an apartment in Arlington, Virginia, and the rest were closed in a bus station locker. None of those places were the right one, quite. He needed the jet again. He needed another sacred space.

The wind slapped his hair into his eyes, and he figured it out. It would cost like hell, but it felt right. He walked down to the taxi, slid in the back passenger side door, and said, "Hoover Dam, please."

*

Black Canyon funneled the wind into his face and made his eyes tear. He closed them and breathed, deep and slow, smelling river and dust and car exhaust and metal warming in the sun. It felt healing as sleep.

It was Boulder Dam for fourteen years--even though it wasn't built in Boulder Canyon after all--because Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior didn't want to give Hoover credit. The first concrete was poured in June of 1933. If it had been done in a single pour, without the refrigerated-water piping technology Union Carbide invented for the job, the concrete would have taken 125 years to cool. But the structure wouldn't have stood long enough for it to happen, since the heat of curing would have cracked the dam. Even so, the concrete was still curing, still getting stronger. There were seventeen turbine generators in the power plant; together they could produce 2,074 megawatts of electrical power, if humans and the Colorado River let them. Los Angeles consumed 15.4 percent of Hoover's output; the state of Nevada claimed 23.37.

He tipped his head back and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, leaning into the wind like a figurehead on a sailing ship. *See? I'm still from here*. The dam had been a talisman for him, when he was a kid; it reminded him that intelligence and creativity and knowledge could solve problems beyond the limits of human strength.

He came from Las Vegas. And he came from a landscape of knowledge he'd built himself, when his environment had seemed hostile to human life and beyond his strength.

A landscape with no one else in it. A fortress. Like Ellen Shayle's spotless apartment.

But he had let other people in. Ramona, until her canopy opened on an off heading. Amarilis, until she realized mortality wasn't optional. The team, until they failed to read his mind, or read it a little too well. Daphne and Hafidha, until he needed them enough that it scared him, and he had to bolt.

So what was the difference between a fortress and a prison? Which was he living in?

He stood halfway between Arizona and Nevada, between coyote and hero, between whatever had made him and whatever he was going to make himself.

I'll take care of you, baby boy. My angel..

Terror kicked him in the chest. It tilted the world around him. He clutched the railing, leaned into it, fighting vertigo, nausea, racing heartbeat. *It's flashbulb memory. It's brain chemistry. It's not real*.

I'll always be with you, William Villette replied.

All that wind, and nothing to breathe. It wasn't real.

Of course it was. Real as brain chemistry. Real as the monster he lived with.

I'm okay, cowboy. I just cut myself. And his mom had left him to the mercy of a world she knew didn't have any. She'd run away. Why shouldn't he?

Breathe. Straighten up. Open your eyes. Survive the next five minutes.

Or you could kill the monster. That was his job, what he was made to do. Who else would do it? He was the only one who knew what he really was.

...What evil lurks in the hearts of men.

Quick. Before it hears you thinking.

He'd tipped the balance, fed Ron's hate and fear, and pushed Ron to feed Angela's and spread the horror to Marti, Baxter, Ochoa, every officer in the desert last night. The monster thrived on horror.

Then he'd saved everybody.

You can't save everybody.

He couldn't undo the damage they'd already suffered. But Angela would live. Marti would still have her sister, and the chance to work out the old hurts between them. Ron's secret would be opened to the light, and if he could survive that, he might heal from it. Ellen Shayle might, too. And last night's responders could say, "We had one last night could have been a real mess. Turned out okay, though."

He'd robbed the monster. He'd done his job.

You made the mistake. You can't be trusted. You'll let them down.

Maybe he would. But everyone deserved a chance to repair the damage. Even him.

"Young man? Are you all right?" It was a woman's voice, from somewhere beside and below his right shoulder. She was small, round, with permed white hair and the big boxed-in sunglasses made to fit over eyeglasses or an eye bandage. She wore a t-shirt, knee-length shorts, and sandals, and the maple leaf on the t-shirt said that as far as she was concerned, this wasn't autumn.

He squeezed his eyes closed, felt the stiffness in his hands on the rail and the moisture drying on his face. He must have been standing there a while. "Yes--yes, ma'am. I just... The wind. I guess."

Her head bobbed once. "I wanted wind, I could have stayed in Alberta." A frown crease showed above the dark plastic of her glasses as she looked out at the glaring white arc of the dam. "A hell of a lot of concrete. I guess someone thought it needed doing." She eyed him sharply. "You should get in out of the sun. You look a little peaked."

"Yes, ma'am," he said breathlessly, and watched her march away toward the Nevada side.

A hell of a lot of concrete. He began to laugh. One person's inspiration was another person's damned tourist attraction.

He turned and started toward Nevada himself, jamming his hands into his jacket pockets. His left one curled around an unfamiliar hard palm-size object. Oh--his temporary cell phone.

The last entry in the "recent calls" list would be the one from Ron. He could clear the list. Or, instead of making his mistakes disappear, he could try to amend them. He couldn't fix what he'd done to Ron, but that wasn't his only error in judgment.

He flipped the phone open and thumbed in the number from ridiculous, useful memory.

"Todd," Solomon Todd said in his ear.

"You want a shot glass? From Caesar's?" Chaz asked, feeling as if he'd just caught up to the conversation back in D.C.

A silence long enough to make him wonder if he'd lost the signal. "I do."

"Duke, I know you have an abiding appreciation for absurd Americana--"

"Good grief," Todd said in a failing voice that was probably assumed. "You sound like me."

"Don't distract me when I'm refusing to do you a favor." He felt weird, giddy and floating, and he didn't think it was low blood sugar. "I can't have something like that on my conscience. Or my credit card statement."

Chaz could hear Todd's determinedly solemn expression. "No, no, not one out of the gift shop. I want a shot glass off the tray of a beautiful waitress on the casino floor."

Low blood sugar didn't cause auditory hallucinations. "You want me to *steal* a--" Pedestrians' heads turned. He lowered his voice. "And how would you know where I got it?"

"Oh, documenting provenance is up to you. Good luck." Call ended.

Chaz frowned at the open phone and shook his head. "One of us," he said to the man who wasn't on the line anymore, "is a bad influence."

He was so filthy he itched. Howard Hughes, indeed. He lengthened his stride. Shower at the Riv, and then, damn it, he was getting bread pudding if he had to walk all the way to Fremont Street to get it. Everything else could wait.

No, he had another call to make first. *Call me when they're done with you,* Marti had said.

Oh, god. And he was going to have to ask her to help him get his backpack out of that luggage locker.

He was never the star of the movie. Yet here he was--location, lighting, big character growth moment. No soundtrack, though. But Bob Mould's voice popped into his head, clear as if he had his earbuds in: *Standing on the edge of the Hoover Dam...*

All right, then.

...And if you've made a deal with the guy with the horns and the cape...

Chaz walked on, imagining his very own crane shot climbing, climbing, turning him into a dot on a hell of a lot of concrete.

*

"...but you really do need a cast-iron frying pan."

"Sure I do. I'll save it for when there's someone else around to scrub the fried egg out of it."

"Properly seasoned cast iron is practically non-stick!"

"You are *such* a food geek."

"And I see you're eating the results."

"Hello? Do I look crazy?"

Chaz watched Marti smear ginger marmalade on her last biscuit half. God, he loved feeding people. Instant evidence that he'd made the world better for somebody.

"You're welcome to come do my dishes anytime, you know." She bit into the biscuit as if to keep herself from saying anything else.

Except he was going home, and home wasn't here.

She must have read it on his face. She swallowed the bite and said, "Does the department have to officially call in the Feds before you'll set foot in Las Vegas again?"

"No! No. I'd like to visit. I like you." *Take what you're offered, for fuck's sake, Chazzie. It's not your responsibility if somebody else gets hurt.* But this moment, with Marti in her kitchen, was a happy one. He didn't want to turn it into a moment when he could have done the right thing, and hadn't. "So--so I have to be honest about it."

She held her half-eaten biscuit over her plate. He was glad; if she set it down, he suspected it would be a bad sign. "No happily ever after?" He tried to decide what her lifted eyebrows and pursed lips meant.

He weighed all the possible answers. "No," he said at last, because that was what they all meant, and Marti wasn't the sort of person who'd appreciate it if he made her decode them.

She twisted her lips a little, a shrug with her mouth. "I didn't think so." She popped the last of the biscuit in her mouth. "Friends?"

"Jesus," he said, more emphatically than he'd meant to, but not more than he felt. "I hope so."

Marti grinned and licked crumbs off her fingers. Chaz tried not to watch like a dog following a forkful of bacon. She said, "Quantico offers seminars for local police, did you know? Helps build a good working relationship between the FBI and the cops. And they look really good on a girl's resume when promotions come around."

His heart revved a little. "You're just going to use me to advance your career?"

Watching him, she licked her index finger once more. "Honey, you've got way more uses than that." She used the finger to swipe a dab of marmalade off her plate. Then she smudged the marmalade in the center of his slack lower lip, leaned across the table and the ruins of breakfast, and kissed him.

*

There was a plastic evidence bag on Solomon Todd's desk.

He looked left and right. It was early; Reyes's and Falkner's offices were shut and dark, and Hafidha's sanctum, when he'd passed it, was empty. The desks in the bullpen looked as they had when he'd left work the night before.

Except his.

Popular entertainment taught a person certain lessons, valid or not. One of them was never to open a head-sized box or the equivalent without gloves and backup. Possibly not without the bomb squad. Someday one of the prey was bound to start hunting the hunters, after all.

This could be that day. Or it could be the beginning of a practical joke, but no one had the heart for jokes lately.

Or it could be from Down the Hall and full of evidence. Stranger things had happened.

None of the info blanks on the bag were filled in. Inside he could see a fist-sized ball of paper napkin. He lifted the bag by its zip-lock top. Correction: something heavier wrapped in a paper napkin.

He'd look like an idiot if he waited for backup and it was nothing. He opened the plastic bag and took out the napkin-wrapped bundle.

The napkin fell open around a shot glass. At the rim of the glass was a smudge of cherry-colored lipstick.

On his desktop monitor, the "new mail" alert was blinking in the menu bar. He opened his mail reader. The top message was from a dot-gov address he didn't recognize. He clicked on it.

There was no text, just a camera-phone photo. Chaz stood near a casino blackjack table, wearing his corduroy jacket over a black t-shirt printed with "I (heart) LV." *Laundry day?* Todd thought. Chaz's eyes were closed--of course, in almost any photo of Chaz his eyes were closed--but his mouth was stretched in a closed-lipped, self-conscious grin.

The woman beside him, wearing a charming and historically-improbable Roman-goddess cocktail waitress uniform, barely reached Chaz's shoulder. She was tugging him off-balance by his jacket sleeve; his cheek was almost in reach of her pursed lips. She had smooth, caramelly skin (*Salted*

caramels, Todd thought, and made himself blush). Even braided, her thick dark brown hair hung to her waist. The lipstick that was about to be transferred to Chaz's cheek was cherry-colored.

Behind him, a familiar throat cleared itself.

Chaz's jacket had survived the photo session, but had gone back to covering a shirt and tie and holding up his backpack strap. Only Chaz's face could manage to do smug and apologetic at once. He was distinctly more brown than he'd been when he left.

"I hope I didn't promise to forfeit anything," Todd said. His throat felt tight. He refused to be embarrassed about it.

"Success is its own reward."

"Did you use your badge to get this?"

"Of course not," Chaz replied, affronted.

"That must be why it took you so long."

Instead of rising to the bait, Chaz's eyelids dropped to half-mast, and his smile got one-cornered and private. "I promised to make breakfast for a friend."

Falkner appeared over Chaz's shoulder. (Genies used a cloud of smoke; Falkner didn't indulge in that sort of theatrics.) Mild and unemphatic, as if to a nervous dog, she said, "Las Vegas field office called."

Chaz flinched and paled under his new tan.

"They said next time we send someone to consult with Vegas Metro, would we please let them know first?"

Chaz opened his mouth. He looked as if he were trying to think of something to say to a man with a gun. "I... That wasn't..."

Falkner held up one hand, pressed the air with it. "Just passing on the message." She walked soft-footed past Chaz to the kitchenette. Chaz, eyes round and eyebrows up, watched her the whole way.

Consulting? Vegas Metro? Oh, no, nobody could expect Todd to let that lie. He'd built two careers on hunting information to its lair.

Based on the set of Chaz's jaw, Todd doubted there was anything to be gained by questioning the suspect. Hafidha might be induced to pull up the Vegas police logs, however. "Welcome home, young monotreme." He patted Chaz on the shoulder lightly, just to see him roll his eyes, and sauntered off toward Hafidha's sanctum sanctorum.

At the door, he looked back. Chaz was in his desk chair.

All was not right with the world. But at least the possibility existed.

Hafidha was taking a video iPod apart. On three of her monitors, status bars showed something uploading or downloading, or, for all he knew, loading in three dimensions, this being Hafidha. Her laptop was running some kind of news reader sort-and-save.

"Doesn't that void the warranty?"

She snorted. "Warranties are for amateurs."

"Silly me. Of course they are. May I ask a not-entirely-work-related favor?"

Hafidha eyed him over the tops of her glasses. They were the glossy purple ones that looked as if they were made from grape hard candy. The bottom inch of her hair matched them. "I'd say, 'What's in it for me?' but my Uncle Duke knows how to take care of a girl."

"You will have cheesecake wherever you go. Can you pull up some Las Vegas police records from last week for me?"

"I can." She rolled her chair away from the desk and put her feet up. "I'm just not going to."

Todd studied her profile. "You already know what Chaz got up to."

Hafidha had the best "Hel*lo*, duh" expression of anyone he knew. "My little brother's back is always covered. Always."

Todd pretended he didn't notice the break in her voice on the last word.

"I respect your judgment," he said. "I withdraw the request. And you can still have the cheesecake."

*

Chaz contemplated the box of toothpicks on his desk. They were holding down a folded piece of half-sheet note paper. He decided to reserve

judgment on the visual aids until he read the text.

He slid the paper out and unfolded it. In black ink and precise, confident handwriting: *I got a prescription.* That was all. No signature, but it didn't really need one.

Some damage took a long time to heal. Some never healed at all. There was no way to tell one from the other except to keep up the treatment until the patient got better or died. Why should he think that wasn't true for everyone?

Falkner walked out of the kitchenette, mindful of her full coffee cup. She swept the bullpen with a look--taking stock--and met Chaz's eyes.

Chaz nodded. One game face to another. Falkner walked down the aisle and into her office.

Lau slalomed between the desks with a case folder and followed Falkner in. In a minute, they'd be called into the briefing room because somebody somewhere, broken beyond endurance, had done something horrible. Time to go back in the closet with the monsters.

If all he could do was stack up toothpicks, that's what he'd do. He could prop himself up with them until he was strong enough to stand by himself.

When he was strong enough, he'd tell his friends about the mirror. Maybe he could be strong enough that he'd never need to use it. They'd never have to know. *Take that, voice in my head.*

"Welcome home," he whispered.

His eyes fell on the bare surface of the privacy barrier between his desk and Todd's. The push pins studded it, holding up nothing. He pulled his backpack onto the desk, groped into the front pocket, and found the photos. He pinned them back where they belonged. Then he rose and headed for the kitchenette and coffee. He'd be ready by the time Falkner called them.

"Home is not where you live, but where they understand you"

--Christian Morganstern

Music live cues and lyrics:

Amanda Palmer, "Runs in the Family"
Justin Sullivan, "Home"

Jo Dee Messina, "My Give a Damn's Busted"
Regina Spektor, "On the Radio"
Warren Zevon, "Lawyers, Guns, and Money"
Sugar, "Hoover Dam"

Trust

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, October 2008

When Hafidha walks into his office and shuts the door behind herself, Reyes straightens against the back of his chair. For a moment, he feels like Remo Williams: the fact of her distress is obvious to him, and once he would have known how he knew it, the thousand little tells that give her away. But now there's just the gestalt of her stance, her frown, the tightness between her eyes and the tighter way she slides her fingers around the doorknob.

"Villette," he says, because nothing else could put that miserable pinch between her eyes and in the corners of her mouth.

She nods. He wonders why she came to him and not Falkner, and just as quickly understands: because this is a command decision, and whatever has happened, she wants as few people to know it as possible. He stands up, comes around the desk, and lets her have the advantage of her height and heels. She glares, but he stops before she either takes a step back or swings at him. Hostility rolls off her in waves.

"Tell me," he says.

Her mouth thins. "Bought a one-way ticket to Las Vegas."

Unsurprised, Reyes echoes her nod. Villette's not so much in the wind as going to ground. It's understandable.

Not for the first time, Reyes wonders if he's broken the unit for good. If Chaz doesn't come back, neither Hafidha nor Worth will stay. Maybe not even in the FBI. Brady will be touch and go, and if he loses Brady, he loses Lau.

Which is no more than he deserves, if that's the way it falls out. Maybe it would be best if he went first, left Todd and Falkner to clean up his mess. Then at least somebody would still be looking out for the civilians.

Hafidha steels herself, back straightening, chest rising under a pewter-colored ruffled silk pirate shirt. "Is he a fugitive?"

Reyes drifts toward the desk. With every step he takes away from her, her shoulders drop a millimeter. "Officially, he's on medical leave," Reyes says. "He's a free man. He's entitled to come and go as he likes."

Her hand twists at the knob again, but she doesn't open the door. "And if he doesn't come back?"

Reyes doesn't care if she sees him wince. "That's his choice too, Special Agent Gates. He's neither a suspect nor a criminal. We aren't in the business of indenturing our agents."

Her slackening isn't a flinch or forgiveness. It's relief. She proves it by nodding once and pulling the door ajar, but his voice stops her before she steps through it.

"Thank you for trusting me with this," he says.

Hafidha looks over her shoulder, mascara widening gamine eyes that--today--are her natural brown.

"It wasn't trust," she says and puts her game face on before she goes, the door drifting open again behind her.

Sufficient

Washington, D. C., October 27, 2008

Daphne Worth knows better. But she sits on the couch beside her wife in the half-unpacked living room, her laptop open on her knees, and every so often she switches away from her solitaire game and hits refresh one more time.

Even though she knows the blank white webpage with the one line of text at the top is not going to change.

That's probably healthier than her other option, which is rereading his last page of comments on her LiveJournal over and over again, and feeling the little sting every time she sees the black strikeout through his name.

She did something wrong, somewhere in that conversation. She doesn't know what it was, or wasn't. She doesn't know where she said it or didn't say it. But somewhere there, in black and white in the comment thread, is the evidence of how she failed him. She can tell it's there when she re-reads, even if she can't find it. There's a moment when his tone changes, when the defenses go up again, bright-edged and brittle.

Before then, they'd been having a conversation. He'd been as open as he'd been in months. And then he'd closed up like a jack-in-the-box, and she'd lost him.

She hopes she hasn't lost him for good.

Tricia is pretending to watch *The Daily Show*, feet tucked under Daphne's butt cheek, lying sideways so she pointedly can't see the computer monitor. Every so often her toes curl, a goofy sort of caress. Daphne reaches out left-handed and rubs Tricia's calf.

Because Tricia's here and Daphne can say it, she says, "I love you."

Tricia mutes the television. She stretches her shoulders back against the arm of the couch and says, "It's on him, you know. This isn't about you." She pauses. "You know how he feels about you."

One good abandonment of media distractions deserves another. Daphne shuts the laptop and bends down to slide it under the edge of the couch. "I

know," she says, and even she can tell she doesn't sound like she believes it. She squeezes Tricia's leg, and closes her eyes. "I just wish--"

"You wish it never happened."

Daphne nods. Her eyes sting. She doesn't bite her cheek to keep from sniffling because Tricia will bang her on the arm if she pretends she's not crying. "Everything has been a trainwreck since--"

It's 11:30 at night. Jon Stewart is signing off. Stephen Colbert's intro is a lot more tolerable with the shrieking eagle silenced. There's no reason for anybody to be ringing the doorbell.

Much less knocking on the door.

Daphne's already on her feet by the time it registers why somebody would knock instead of ringing. Because he knew she would recognize the knock. Because he wanted to give her a moment or two to arrange her face or decide to pretend she wasn't home.

Because he was giving warning, and he didn't know--unless he'd guessed--that Hafidha had IMed her the flight information the second he'd gotten on the plane to come home. If he still thinks of it as home.

If he's planning on staying.

Daphne glances wildly at Tricia, looking for moral support, direction, something. Her heart thumps in her chest at an easy hundred and ten. Zero to panic reaction in one tenth of a second.

Tricia swings her feet down and stands up, so much more stately than Daphne. "Go answer the door," she says, vanishing barefoot towards the kitchen.

"Right," Daphne says, and turns to face it.

She steels herself before she checks the peephole. That glimpse is enough to kick her pulse into even higher gear. She pushes the handle and yanks the sticking door open.

He looks--good. Okay. Rested, for Christ's sake. Fresh haircut. A little less skinny, even, like somebody's been stuffing cake down his throat. His backpack rides his right shoulder, his right hand hooked through the strap. A

duffel bag hangs at the end of his left arm. The bags and his shoulders are spangled with rain.

The fact that he's not dead makes her want to hit him, and they stand facing each other over the threshold for five or ten seconds before he clears his throat and says, "This is the part where I grovel."

"Fuck you," she says, and hauls him over the threshold by his coat. She hugs him, hard, while he drops the duffel and lets the backpack slide down his arm. It bangs her knee before he lets go of it and kicks the door shut behind him. She hears him flip the latch and then he's hugging her back, hard, smelling of airplane and Metro and cheeseburgers and rain. He's a damp armful of broomsticks and gristle wrapped up in a harsh black wool coat way too wintery for the weather, the only padding between them the squish of his sweater. Cool air clings to him like an envelope.

She sobs, and since Tricia's not here this time she bites her lip and shoves her face into his shoulder. His hand goes halfway around her skull when he tentatively cups the back of her head.

"Does this mean I can stay?"

"At least until I'm done killing you," she says, and gives him a squeeze before she steps back. "Come in, sit down. Where'd you go?"

"Vegas," he says, which is the truth.

She wants to ask if he's starving, but it's such a loaded question these days she doesn't dare. Besides, offers of food might be outside the new boundaries, whatever those boundaries are.

He glances at her for permission and shrugs the coat off. Underneath, he looks professional-casual, new jeans and a button-down shirt under a cranberry cable-knit sweater. Respectable for traveling. She pretends not to notice the fanny pack, or the fact that he doesn't strip it off and drop it over the chair by the door with his coat. She reaches out to take his arm and stops.

His shirt-sleeves are rolled up to mid forearm, the ridge of cloth forming a pair of retaining walls that keep the sweater rucked up above them. She hasn't seen him with his wrists uncovered since he got out of the hospital, and now for two or three seconds she stares.

Olive skin, browner than it has been. He got some sun, then, in Vegas. But what draws her gaze like a magnet is the liver-red scars, some surgical and some from the shackle galls. He's been taping his wrists at the gym, hiding them there, too.

They're ugly, but she's seen worse. The right wrist looks inflamed, skin reddened as if chafed and shiny as if oiled. It takes her a moment to realize that the darker-brown lines in the middle of the angry patch aren't more scarring, but ink.

She yanks her gaze away, realizes they're standing by the sofa, and lets her legs sag under her so she thumps down on it. If she did that in front of her father, he would give her a look.

"Sorry," she says. "Chaz, I--"

He shrugs, and folds himself up like a Jacob's ladder to sit down beside her. "My own fault. If I had just... not tried to hide them, everybody would be over it by now." But it bothers him. His voice thins a little in mid-sentence, as if his throat doesn't want to let the words pass. Tomorrow, she thinks, the sleeves will be buttoned again.

She glances to the right, toward the hallway to the kitchen, where she can hear Tricia shaking beans into the coffee grinder. When she looks back at Chaz, he's grinning, lips stretched over crooked teeth. "I saw on your blog you won the bet."

"I wasn't smart enough to bet anything!"

"There was beer involved in the making of that wager."

He was there; of course he knows that. For a dizzy moment she wobbles between then with him, and now with him, and sees in the past six days a chasm she can't bridge. She thought she knew him. She hadn't thought he would ditch his friends like a dog slips a collar.

But he came back. That's enough solid ground to start.

"So... You read the blog." It's a hedgehog thought, hard to touch. He was watching from out of sight.

"Just this morning." His left hand covers his right; his left thumb stretches toward the inflamed patch, stops, tucks under his fingers instead. He

frowns. "You don't have to leave me coded notes on the internet. It's okay to say those things to me."

"I couldn't say anything to you. You weren't here. And as far as I know, saying things like that was what made you leave."

His head jerks up. "You didn't make me. People leave. It happens."

Oh. It's like the strobe-flash of lightning. Oh, Chaz.

The coffee grinder stops growling; she hears Tricia knock the results into the filter. So many things she can say, and so many of them exactly wrong. "They can. Sometimes they don't have a choice. Like my mom. But at least I got to say goodbye to her."

And maybe that's the point: he didn't get that. If he has to hurt, at least he'll have company. But back when she thought she knew him, she would have said he didn't take comfort from other people's pain.

She can see when he hears what she's saying. His eyes close like fists, and his fists open to let his fingers clench white-tipped on his thighs. She wants to take it back, and bites her cheek so she won't try to do it.

His indrawn breath sounds like something being dragged. "I was... I didn't want to do anything I'd regret." He blinks, and she barely sees the shine in his eyes before it's gone. "So instead I did something I regret." The corners of his mouth deepen, twist until they form the frog-grimace she'd once made fun of. She might never have seen it again. The thought feels like an Xacto knife blade loose in her chest cavity.

"You mean that doesn't always happen? Dude, I must be doing something wrong."

He smiles, but he doesn't laugh. He reaches for his right wrist again--*is* that ink?--but his hand changes direction, abrupt and graceless, and scratches his nose instead. "You don't have to let me off easy."

"I'm not letting you off. I want--" I want to yell at you for hurting me. But I never yell, because that leads to hurt all 'round. Why does that sound familiar? In the kitchen, the refrigerator door opens, and she remembers.

"Chaz. You know the fight Tricia and I had, after the Fourth of July barbecue?"

He nods, wary.

"It was about... She said I didn't have to be real for everybody, but I had to be real for her."

He draws his feet in against the front of the sofa, hikes his shoulders. His mouth is thinned and crooked. "Daph, I don't think--"

"I know. You don't-- Nobody's in a position to ask that from you. I'm just saying, you don't have to choose between 'Everything's great' and 'I'm going to go away and come back when I can pretend everything's great.'"

He meets her eyes, and his voice is mild when he says, "I wasn't going to come back."

"I know." They all knew, though she's damned if she's sure how, exactly. No one said it aloud. Even so, hearing it from him has the force of a kick. "Thank you for doing it. Saying goodbye isn't my absolute favorite thing, but it beats the alternative."

"Goodbye?" The word rises to a squeak at the end, which she's pretty sure he hadn't intended.

"It wasn't like I could have missed what happened last week. If you don't want to do the job anymore, it doesn't matter that we think you're doing fine." She almost says, under the circumstances, but that would be faint praise, and unfair. "I could tell you that it doesn't matter where you work, that you're still my best friend. So, okay. I can still be your friend if you're in Vegas, too. We don't have to live in the same city or--"

She hadn't mean that, hadn't meant to offer that. She sounds desperate, and she knows exactly what will happen if she gets grabby: Chaz will vanish like smoke waved by a hand, insubstantial, leaving not even a ghost of warmth. And it hurts that he left and she hasn't forgiven him, but it hurts even more to think that he might become somebody she used to know, and wonders what ever became of.

"Harpy," he says. "I didn't come back to say goodbye."

That stops her dead, a flare of hope and then more anger. If you get angry at the hope, it goes away, and you don't have to live with it getting dashed. "Then why did you come back?"

"I came back because I'm coming back." He shakes his head and knuckles his mouth. "If Falkner hasn't filed any paperwork yet. But I wanted to talk to you first and make sure..." He takes a deep breath. "I wanted to make sure it was okay."

She sits back against the cushions, hands between her knees. Her knees are covered in blue cotton flannel printed with white clouds and yellow stars. Her pajamas. She totally doesn't care. She doesn't care how Chaz sees her. "Okay?"

"If you don't want me to come back, I understand." He looks down. "I know I blew it. I'm sorry. I just never had anybody who would care if I came back, before. Or who wanted me around if everything wasn't great."

It's not his voice she hears in her head when she realizes what he means. It's her dead brother Kenny's, mocking and condescending. Arch. *Shocking though it is, Daffy, there are whole countries of the world that do not revolve around you.* But he'd always been at the center of her family's orbit.

Had it ever occurred to Chaz that something might revolve around him?

She clears her throat, because it needs doing. "You didn't want to presume."

"People project their own drama on others," he says. "I was tired of being a burden."

This time, it is his voice she hears, plain as if he'd spoken it out loud. It's her profiler nature, but it doesn't change what she knows.

Because it's her job, she knows what to say. "Nobody ever wanted you before."

His mouth compresses, as if his lips could hold the words inside. She sees him make the choice to speak. "Unwanted kids, right? It's its own cliché. Most people are too polite to say it to your face. Maybe it's the attachment disorder talking--"

"Chaz," she says, "don't be an idiot. You don't have attachment disorder."

"I have the diagnosis," he says, dryly.

She wants to hit him for a different reason, this time. "Yeah, and that's worth exactly whatever the diploma-mill graduate who hung it around your

neck got paid. You're not a burden. And you don't have to be perfect all the time."

"Don't I?" He elevates one eyebrow like Mr. Spock. "You think I don't know what people say? *Villette was always weird, but since he got hurt, he's a fucking basket case. Would you trust that with a gun?"*

His voice is a cruelly accurate mockery of a flat mid-Atlantic twang, and she wonders when he learned to do accents. "In case you had not noticed, Stanley 'Blaze' Murchison does not speak for the entirety of the Justice Department. Thank God. And when I tell Hafs he said that, he's going to wish I'd just put itching powder in his shorts."

She'd meant it as an empty threat, but Chaz flinches. "Don't," he says. "Don't even joke, please. He may have said it, but other people were thinking it. And they're going to keep thinking it no matter what I do. They expect me to break. And they've got no damned sympathy for any expression of the struggle not to, because it reminds them that it could happen to any of us. Projective denial is fucking ugly, okay?"

She reaches out, finally, and manages to touch his forearm, above the rolled cuff so she's stroking only cloth. "They're scared."

"They think I'm tiresome," he says.

She smiles. "Funny. I feel the same way about them."

He leans forward over his knees, splays his hands out in the air in front of him. She eyes the angry patch of skin again. It really looks like ink. Because he's hunched forward, when he turns his head to look at her, it's parallel to the floor. His trimmed, shining hair flops into his eyes, and he sticks out his lower lip and blows it aside. He says, "When you were Down the Hall, did they know you...that you kept secrets from them?"

"Probably. Everybody has secrets. They maybe even guessed mine. But there's a difference between guessing and being told."

"But...you told us."

She snorts. "If I hadn't, you would have thought I didn't trust you with them."

A muscle pops into relief in his jaw; a tendon pulls tight in his neck. And she remembers his words: I promise to never make you regret that you trust me. This is where she lost him in that on-line conversation. This is the thing that hurts too much to touch.

Under a clatter of plates from the kitchen, she tells him, "It's my choice, who I trust and how much. Don't you dare try to protect me from myself. I'm a goddamn grownup."

Her heart's trying to climb up her throat. That's the problem with stuffing emotions: the cork blows out of the bottle at the worst possible moment. Like, when you're so glad to get your best friend back you can't help but snap at him and lose him forever.

If he were the coyote they call him, his ears would be drooping. He ducks his head between his shoulders. "I didn't mean to be a patronizing, patriarchal dipstick."

He doesn't meant to be funny, either. She can tell. But the phrase is too much for her. She tries to turn her giggle into a cough.

"And I won't do it again."

Tricia squeezes down the dark passageway with a tray and three bottles of beer, sweating necks slotted between her spread fingers. "Thank God you're back," she announces, and clanks the tray down on the coffee table. "I was scared to death we were going to have to plan the kitchen remodel without you." She hands him an open beer. When he reaches for it, she catches one of his fingers, holds on, and stares into his face. He stares back.

It occurs to Daphne to wonder, *Is that about me?*

Chaz nods, a jerk of the head. "That hallway's got to go."

The tray is heaped with pastrami and smoked turkey, split bagels, jars of brown mustard and mayo, deli salads, olives. A carafe that smells like heaven and three coffee cups beside it; caffeine to go with the alcohol. Even to herself, Daphne hadn't admitted why she'd kept the fridge full of food for a week. But Tricia had guessed. Break out the feast. He's come home.

"Mangia," Tricia orders. "If the luggage at the door is anything to go by, you haven't even been home yet."

Daphne blinks. Tricia shakes her head at her. "Some profiler you are."

Chaz's grin is shy but genuine. He reaches for a salt bagel, and Daphne catches herself sneaking another glance at his wrist. Dammit, Daphs. Just ask. She looks him in the eye. "Chaz? Is that a tattoo?"

"Yep." He devotes himself completely to spreading mustard.

"You got it in Las Vegas?"

Smoked turkey. "Uh-huh."

For the third time in one evening, she wants to hit him; it's a record. "Conformist."

He glances up, startled.

"Well, all the other climber boys have ink."

He lowers one eyebrow and flattens his mouth. "You're being mean."

"So are you!" She hands him the potato salad in apology and asks, gentler, "What is it?"

Chaz ducks his head. This time he touches the mark lightly with a fingertip and frowns as if the contact stings. From the inflammation, it probably does. The tone of the ink is only a little darker than his suntanned skin. When the hurt fades, it'll be nearly invisible.

He says, "Cultural appropriation. Chinese character. For--" He clears his throat. He's still hoarse when he says, "'Sufficient.'"

By her estimate, it's near the healed fracture in his wrist--maybe directly over it. She reaches, and is surprised when he doesn't twitch away. In her own turn, she brushes her index finger over the character, feels the heat of fresh injury, the slickness of lotion and lymph.

It wasn't something she said, or didn't say. She would have done anything to fix the broken thing that made him leave, but anything she did would have made it worse. He had to do it for himself.

Her chest hurts, and her throat, but she doesn't cry, because that's not what he needs from her now. Breathe in, breathe out, move forward. "'Sufficient,'" she echoes. "Yeah."

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Sep. 30th, 2008 – Oct. 28th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Sep. 30th, 2008

- 12:02 AM

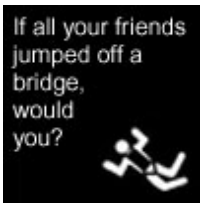
Happy birthday best of Wabbits!

I hereby declare this the year of the Wabbit.

- Current Mood:awake

I'll take angry and helpless for a thousand, Alex.

- Sep. 30th, 2008 at 10:19 AM



Didn't sleep last night, because I stayed up to midnight so I could be Wabbit's first birthday-wisher. And right as I was going to shut down my laptop and go to sleep, I found out about this.

Md. Mother Jailed After Bodies Of 2 Children Found in Freezer

...The girl said her mother had locked her out of their home, Garrett said yesterday, recalling Friday afternoon's encounter. She said she hadn't eaten in three days. And there was more: "She let us know that she had two sisters and that 'my mother beat them to death.' "

Early Saturday, Calvert authorities made a gruesome discovery: the bodies of two children encased in ice in a freezer in the home of Renee D. Bowman, 43. Bowman has been receiving a monthly government subsidy of $2,400 to care for her three adopted children: the 7-year-old girl on the street and two others who are now officially missing....

And after I read it, I had to get out of the apartment for a while. Which turned into a nice long skate around the state of Virginia. Okay, it only felt that like. If you saw a spotted blur around Arlington last night, that was me. And there wasn't any sleep, and today of course I'm at work. Came in early, in fact.

The story's been substantially rewritten since last night, when they had obviously just slapped together something hasty. But last night's version included some little facts and details that have been cut, probably in the interests of good taste. Like the fact that the little girl who survived survived because she climbed out of her bedroom window in her night gown and jumped for it. Like the fact that the freezer in question is a "drop-in" style, and that when investigators opened it, they found a cloudy block of ice with the bodies of two children frozen inside. And the fact that the medical examiner's office was waiting for the ice to thaw before they made any further identification or comment... and it was expected to take a couple of days.

Good. Fucking. God.

They were people. Tiny little people with hardly any recourse, but *people*. They were helpless. They'd been officially given into the possession of a crazy woman by the people who were supposed to look out for them. And everybody stopped looking out for them even a little.

Nobody even noticed they weren't enrolled in school.

And now there's two little girls who are dead, and who died of *torture* (let's call it what it is, people), and a seven-year-old girl who knew her sisters were in the freezer and nobody was ever coming to help her.

This is why I got into this business. Stuff like this. Because no matter how long and hard you skate, you can't skate away from a world in which this kind of thing happens. And it doesn't matter how fast you shovel; there's always more. But that doesn't excuse you from shoveling.

This was one state over. Right next door. It's not the only case like this happening *right next door*. To me, to you.

Just keep an eye out, okay? Because I asked. For me.

- Current Mood: exhausted
- Current Music:you've never seen everything

October 1st, 2008

[Locked work] So, er.

- Oct. 1st, 2008 at 12:08 PM

...how was the cake?

0.0

(And when is Duke getting back from the red states? [You know how good it feels to say that, now that I no longer live in one?])

- Current Mood: concerned

- Current Music:David Byrne - Glass, Concrete & Stone

October All Month

- Oct. 1st, 2008 at 4:56 PM

Let's start off with a classic, shall we?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcOQduHEv08

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. Based on data from Internet Archive, and context clues, it was Monster Mash, by The Misfits: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLSa8hwMWug]

- Current Mood: creeeeepy...
- Current Music:They do the *Monster* Mash.

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 2nd, 2008

Scaaaary, kids!

- Oct. 2nd, 2008 at 9:56 AM

Boo! for you on day number 2:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrbTkNwbUz8

[editor's note: The Cramps – I Was A Teenage Werewolf]

- Current Mood: Eeek!

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 3rd, 2008

Fear me!

- Oct. 3rd, 2008 at 10:06 AM

And my artsy German cinema makeup!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPw1i9dAJiQ

[editor's note: Marilyn Manson – I Put A Spell On You]

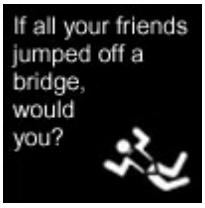
- Current Mood: muwah-hah-hah
- Current Music:Because you're miiiine!

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

"Sometimes it's good to be the boss."

- Oct. 3rd, 2008 at 2:45 PM



All right. **matociquala** made me do it. Well, her and every other geek I know.

I too am now watching *The Middleman.*

And I'm not done with the first season yet, but I have to say the single coolest thing about this whole show is that the lead character is a woman of color, and the show--while characterizing her accurately--makes absolutely no fuss about it. She code switches and she's fluently bilingual and this is not at all a show about a Latina superhero.

It's a show about a superhero. Who is also an artist and a slacker hipster and a Latina.

...it's almost like the writers know real human people and talk to them on a regular basis.

- Current Mood: happy

Tags:

- tv

October 4th, 2008

"I'm not afraid."

- Oct. 4th, 2008 at 10:51 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YxRTN5I7ok

[editor's note: The embedded youtube video has since been removed. It appears to have been Cab Calloway – Minnie the Moocher: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mq4UT4VnbE]

Where can I find a girl like Betty? Only with a climbing habit....

Current Mood: cheerful

Current Music:Cab Calloway - Minnie the Moocher

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

Public Service Announcement

- Oct. 4th, 2008 at 3:09 PM

The Federal Bureau of Instigation would like to warn all citizens about the dangers inherent in Halloween. To wit:

Pumpkin carving for the obsessive, resulting in porch decoration so awesome the artist will have to sit up all night in the front yard with a shotgun to protect it from vandals:
[editor's note: there was an image here, but I can't find what it was.]

Pumpkin-related behavior likely to increase the number of abandoned houses in the affected neighborhood:
[editor's note: there was an image here, but I can't find what it was.]

Please celebrate responsibly. Thank you.

Current Mood: try this at home

Tags:

- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 5th, 2008

You are here.

- Oct. 5th, 2008 at 7:08 AM

Did you know the Midwest is full of colleges? Billions. (Okay, not billions. But I think they were founded the way we build prisons now.) And a lot of them are *tiny*. What's it like to go away to a small college? Wouldn't it feel as if everyone was staring at you?

Which leads me to this totally appropriate scary video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33602xixNvY

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. Based on Internet Archive data, it was Alice Cooper (?) and the Muppets – School's Out: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om0TdoOsP2M]

Current Mood: awake. almost.

Current Music:yawning

Tags:

- music,

- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 6th, 2008

One is wrong because he does right. And one is right because he does wrong.

- Oct. 6th, 2008 at 10:07 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8b_zIy97FyE

[editor's note: a clip from the film Glen or Glenda, featuring the quote below.]

"Pull the strings! Dance to that which one is created for!"

Bela Lugosi is still creepy even when he's not in a horror movie.

ETA: Oops, gotta scamper. May not be online much today!

Current Mood: cynical

Current Music:Ed Wood

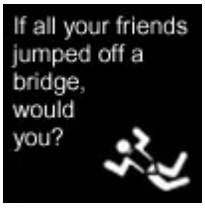
Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 7th, 2008

"I'm lying through my teeth."

- Oct. 7th, 2008 at 7:12 AM



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUITn7I9-f0

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is Voltaire – When You're Evil, but with video clips edited to appear that Jack Skellington from Nightmare Before Christmas is singing it.]

It's like chocolate and peanut butter. Like Bogey and Bacall.

It's just pure unadulterated *awesome*.

Current Mood: awwwwwesome

Current Music:Disturbed - Down with the Sickness

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 8th, 2008

[locked work] Don't talk. Just listen

- Oct. 8th, 2008 at 9:07 PM

The thing that scares me most is that maybe he was right.

October 9th, 2008

[When the things that make me weak and strange get engineered away.]

- Oct. 9th, 2008 at 8:53 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDiDK_yBCw0

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is Jonathon Coulton – The Future Soon]

(Sorry I missed a day yesterday. Traveling.)

Current Mood:awake

Current Music:Jonathan Coulton - The Future Soon

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 10th, 2008

[I wish I lived on this block.]

- Oct. 10th, 2008 at 7:37 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=176Zp3SsoqQ

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is a house decorated with a Halloween-themed light show]

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 11th, 2008

The scariest video of all

- Oct. 11th, 2008 at 8:52 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0yC_3LikYU

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It has not been archived. It appears to have had something to do with Elvira, based on comments on the link on other sites.]

Current Mood: sleepy

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 12th, 2008

Nothing says doom quite like:

- Oct. 12th, 2008 at 9:16 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MThEoxSWURA

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is Michael Jackson – Thriller, with the music video animated using legos]

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 13th, 2008

Late...*

- Oct. 13th, 2008 at 3:05 PM

...just like the title character.

You have to follow the link, because Universal Music Group is ass.
[editor's note: the video is not embedded. It is Rob Zombie – Living Dead Girl]

*Forgot to post it this morning before climbing. Sorry!

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 14th, 2008

Here's an FYI

- Oct. 14th, 2008 at 9:10 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXs78MASeR4

[editor's note: Jonathon Coulton – RE: Your Brains]

Current Mood: tired

Current Music:nnnhhh.

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 15th, 2008

The Blue Beetle backfires in terror

Oct. 15th, 2008 at 7:02 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC46Szk08YI

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is "Giant pumpkins smashing a car"]

And more details of the carnage:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEbyrSvxf7U

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is "Pumpkin dropped on car 2008"]

Rural life. You grow 'em, you throw 'em.

Current Music:AC/DC. Crunch.

Tags:

- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 16th, 2008

Mother Internet Will Provide

- Oct. 16th, 2008 at 7:50 AM

Jack o'lantern carving not an option this season?

This will make you feel better.
[editor's note: a simple pumpkin carving simulator. Archived link: http://web.archive.org/web/20081016051843/http://www.coasttocoastam.com/timages/page/pumpkin_sim.html]

(I made a Sarah Palin jack o'lantern, but it was too scary to post.)

Current Mood: enabling

Current Music:Duke, humming. Can't tell what.

Tags:

- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 17th, 2008

...and little teeth.

- Oct. 17th, 2008 at 11:44 AM

Because there were *complaints* (well, one) about yesterday's post, I bow to peer pressure.

Again with the stupid embedding disabled, so follow the link for creepy goodness, with cello.

[editor's note: the linked youtube video has since been removed. It has not been archived, and I cannot find other information on it]

Current Mood: cold

Current Music:see above

Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

Two for one day.

- Oct. 17th, 2008 at 6:16 PM

Levi Stubbs has died at the age of 72. You may know him as the frontman for the Four Topps. Or you may know him as the voice of....

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGRN39oifsE

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It was Little Shop of Horrors – Feed Me: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLjook1I0V4]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLO7IxKwruc

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It was Little Shop of Horrors Mean Green Mother Scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mdz1slm7pA0]

Current Mood: sad

October 18th, 2008

You guys first.

- Oct. 18th, 2008 at 9:12 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w267wi4wy8Y

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It was Spike Lee & Co. Do It A Capella (2). I don't know what the (2) was about, but this is likely an equivalent video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UZZpkRwnNQ]

Current Mood: sleepy

Current Music:calypsonians

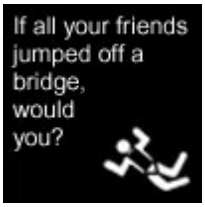
Tags:

- music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 19th, 2008

Turn those lights off now, please.

- Oct. 19th, 2008 at 8:37 AM



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5etWdDtvBa4

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video is Siouxsie and the Banshees – Voodoo Dolly – Live 1981]

How sick is it that I think she's unbelievably hot?

Because that concert happened *before I was born*.

Current Mood: some assembly required

Current Music:...her nails are deep in your hair.

October 20th, 2008

More movie series should have Cliff's Notes.

Oct. 20th, 2008 at 12:46 PM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3kLI2oyd6I

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. I believe it was the theme from John Carpenter's Halloween: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqVyois9mp4]

Current Mood: beeaat

Current Music:plinkplinkplinkplink

Tags:

- (not really) music,
- october,
- the most wonderful time of the year

October 21st, 2008

Poppets. Puppets. Poppet puppets. Scary.

- Oct. 21st, 2008 at 8:24 AM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMOjbfhMKr4

[editor's note: the embedded youtube video has since been removed. It has not been archived. Based on other sites, it may have had something to do with Pan's Labyrinth.]

Current Music:see video

Tags:

1. music,
2. october,
3. the most wonderful time of the year

October 28th, 2008

Elvis doesn't live here anymore.

- Oct. 28th, 2008 at 12:49 AM

Hey there.

Sorry about the drama. It was... it was an emotional decision, and I didn't handle it well. So yeah, I'm sorry. And I'm here to apologize, and to say thanks, and to explain a little.

But I'm not back.

See, I realized something. This lj--this is somebody I used to be. And I can't be that guy anymore. He's poison, and it's killing me to try to pretend to be him.

So even though I'm going to miss this guy, and this journal, I've got to let go of this. I can't hate him, and I can't kill him. He doesn't deserve to be expunged from the record, even if for a while I thought he did.

But I can't be him either. So I'm just going to leave him here for now and move on.

I'll be around, you know. I'm not going into hiding. I'm good, everything's good. I just won't be here.

But don't feel like you have to come find me unless you want to, and don't... expect things to be the same. They're not the same.

I'm not the same.

I love you guys.

--Chaz

Current Location:home

Current Music:cars on the street

Acronyms

10:00 AM, October 31, 2008, Washington, D.C.

Kay Baylor is fiftyish, frowning, brown-haired, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed. She wears a retro micro-houndstooth-check pantsuit in chocolate and white and meticulous, slightly smoky eyeliner. On her desk rests a pad of paper with fourteen sheets remaining, a single yellow Ticonderoga pencil, a digital recorder, a coffee cup, and a folded pair of square-framed reading glasses.

The frown is for Chaz.

"Agent Villette. If you can't speak freely to me, there's a limit to how much good I can do you."

Chaz shrugs, by way of hiding his disappointment; he did sort of hope she could help him, even though he's been "helped" by dozens of asshats he'd like to see drowned in buckets. The only thing he hates more than psychologists is psychiatrists: the M.D. seems to make them more convinced everyone they meet desperately needs their intervention to be well.

You do need her intervention to be well.

She straightens her pencil across her pad and continues, "Which is why I already know what the ACTF does. And Agent Gates's and your particular qualifications for being on your team. If you don't choose to tell me any more than I already know, I'll work within those limitations. And whatever you tell me--no matter what it touches on--I will not share with anyone else, for any reason." Baylor raises her eyebrows and smiles a teeny, tiny smile. "I hope you haven't been robbing convenience stores and running a meth lab in your off-work hours. But if you have, your secret's safe with me."

It's a counselor's *job* to break the ice, to put the patient at ease and build trust so she can then challenge him. Still, Chaz blinks, and can't hide a quick smile.

This time, as he didn't last time he saw her, he says, "...You should probably call me Chaz."

She nods. "Yes, I think I should."

"I haven't been running a meth lab."

"That's a relief. I notice you didn't say anything about convenience stores."

"No convenience stores," he says. He twists his hands in his lap. "Doctor Baylor--Kay--I..."

She waits, like you're supposed to. She frowns with amiable concern, body language open and attentive. Like you're supposed to.

Chaz wonders if it would be easier to trust her if he didn't know himself how she's been trained to do what she's doing.

He takes a breath and lays it on the table. Baldly, so there can be no mistake. "You also know what happened to me in Texas."

He's proud of himself for getting it all out in one sentence, Texas like it's just a place, with no stammering and no hesitation for emphasis, no dripping vitriol.

She nods.

He reaches for the water glass and empties it, continues in the same tone. "I'm suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. Bad. It's affecting everything. Work, sleep, play, relationships. Leaving my apartment. Staying in it. Everything. I'll be honest with you. The way things are now, I'm headed for the-- for the scrap heap."

"Whose diagnosis?"

His smile grows a little broader, a little bitterer. "I am a psychologist."

*

Kay Baylor looks appraisingly across her desk at the skinny, huddled, miserable man in the exquisitely comfortable chair opposite, trying to keep her gaze and expression soft. Receptive. Open to whatever he might say.

She nods. Touché. It's not a run of the mill self-diagnosis. *But*-- "I hope you don't plan to self-treat."

He shrugs. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't need help."

"But?"

"I can handle the cognitive and behavioral stuff on my own. But--" He makes a funny rolling gesture with his hands. "I'm depressed. Major depression. I'm catastrophizing. I don't want medication, not yet. But I need an outsider's perspective."

There's more. He's staring at the privacy panel on her desk, nerving himself. Whatever comes next is the thing he's here about, the thing that's got him wringing his stalky hands with hope and fear.

He says, "And I want EMDR."

Baylor folds her hands around the pencil to keep the right one from snaking out to her coffee cup. That was a major confidence; this is really not the time to look casual or dismissive, no matter how much she could use the propping up. "Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. I'm qualified."

His face twists into an unreadable expression. Maybe he thought she would have to give him a referral. Would that be worse for him, or better?

"That means you're going to have to provide me with specific and detailed information about what happened to you, and what your triggers are."

"I know," he says, lips thinning in a pained grimace. "I'm going to have to tell you about the... about getting freaked out by--mirrors."

His hands flex harder. His adam's apple bobs like the word physically hurt him.

"Just mirrors?"

He shakes his head, allowing the hair that falls free to hide his eyes.

She makes a note. They'll come back to this later. "And it's not going to happen overnight. We'd need to get you to a more stable place, first, and then start working through the trauma."

"I need more cope," he agrees. "But I want to *fix* this." He takes a deep breath. "I don't need it anymore. I'm ready to put it away."

"Are you sure you don't need it?"

The look he gives her suggests the sentence wasn't in English.

"Stress disorder behaviors are adaptive and survival-oriented. Your job involves long periods of intense mental activity with high stakes, punctuated by moments of extreme physical danger." By the closed expression on his face, he already knows what's coming, but she says it anyway. "Are you sure this isn't your brain and body telling you they've had enough?"

He's quiet for a long time, long enough to let her know he's thinking about it. Really thinking. Looking at his hands, absently rubbing his left thumb across the bone of his right wrist in a self-comforting gesture.

"This is what I've got," he says, finally. "This is my life. It's what I am good for."

"Do you think that's a balanced existence?"

"No," he says. "But it's what I have. This is my, my family." He looks up, finally, thin and drawn under light sienna skin, and takes a breath to nerve himself before he meets her eyes. "And if I can't have it any more, I think I'd rather make that decision from a position of strength. As a whole person."

"You don't feel like a whole person now?"

He shakes his head.

She makes a note for the transcript. "I cleared you to return to duty, Chaz."

"You did." He gives her a brief, dazzling smile. "You probably saved my life."

She nods. "I know." She doesn't see any need to remind him that she took a risk in doing so. "I'm honored that you felt safe in coming back to me now. I have some idea how hard that level of trust must be for you."

He reaches for the chunky Anchor Hocking water glass again, but it's empty. He holds it in both hands, knuckles whitening as the skin over them pulls taut. He opens his mouth, can't quite speak, and tries again. "But you think I can't be an asset to the Bureau anymore. You think I can't be an asset to-- to the team."

"I think," she says quietly, "that you would be an asset to any group you chose to associate yourself with. I was reminding you that your mind and

body have their own wisdom, and asking you to consider what was best for you, not for the *Eff Bee Aye*." She lets herself smile, conspiratorial. The mockery is easier to get to than maybe it should be. "Or Stephen Reyes."

He sits back hard in the exquisitely comfortable chair, recoiling. "You have a problem with Reyes?"

"I have opinions," she says.

A calculated risk, but he laughs, sharp and startled, and then winces and stretches against the back of the chair as if laughing made his shoulders hurt. Withdrawing again.

They're way off-script here. She made a mistake, bringing up Stephen, but she can correct that. "That's not the same thing as a problem. But this isn't about me, Chaz. It's about doing what's best for you, not about living up to anyone else's expectations."

"You're telling me not to stand on my pride."

"Do you feel like that's what you've been doing?"

His smile is tight over a face without much flesh to spare for tightening. It makes him look cadaverous, frightening. "It's the only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning. Doctor Baylor--Kay--please. I can't live like this. If you think I'm not fit for duty, that's... that's your prerogative. I knew coming in to talk to you that I was taking that risk.

"My friends--" He lets his head fall forward, hair breaking in locks around his neck. He laughs at his knees. "My co-workers. Same thing. We have a thing we say. We say it a lot, given the job. 'ECR.'"

"ECR?"

"It's a TLA. Three letter acronym."

"Like FBI."

He nods, chin to chest. "It means *emotionally complex response*. I'm having one now."

While he's not looking, Baylor bites her lip, hoping she's not making a decision that will cost this young man--brilliant, crippled, half her age, and how the hell did she ever get so old?--his life, or even more of his soul.

Ridiculously, she realizes, she wants to protect him. And the best way to protect him is to get him out of the field.

But that's not her job. Her job is to give him the tools he needs to navigate the battlefield of the world, and the strength to make good choices.

"I have an opening this afternoon at three," she says. "Or if you'd rather sleep on it before you make your decision, tomorrow first thing?"

He lifts his chin, lips thin, and shakes his head. "I wouldn't be doing any sleeping."

*

"Wabbit? Can I come in?"

"Platypatootie, have I ever said no?"

Narrow as a shadow, he slips into her office and quietly, decisively, shuts the door. Leans against it, all bent and wicked angles.

"We've got a psychiatrist on staff here. Kay Baylor. She did my return to duty eval."

Hafidha nods. She's talked to Doctor Baylor once or twice her own self. Likes her, in an all-the-buttons-buttoned sort of way.

Chaz takes a deep, nerving breath, and asks, "Would you do me a tiny little favor and run her--"

"No need. Remember the second wife? The one Duke said he was a little envious of? I got curious and looked up the marriage licenses, too."

"Oh, God," Chaz says. "Another one! Fuck's sake, did Dad assemble my entire care team by sleeping with them?"

Hafidha grins at her monitors. *Totally* worth the wait. "Well, sugar cookie, it just means they have a broader area of competence than you expected."

Chaz's head thumps lightly against the panel. "Agggggh. Brain bleach..."

Without looking away from her monitors, Hafidha answers, "Applicants for this position must hold Ph.D. or equivalent clinical experience...."

There, that did it. Chaz snorts and straightens, back sliding up the door as long legs lever him vertical. "It's good to be the King."

Hafs spins in her chair. "You know, I know somebody else with a tendency to trip into bed with any hot, competent, available woman who crosses his path--"

"Leaving!" Chaz says, stepping away from the door so he can jerk it open with sufficient force. "Leaving! See me leave?"

He steps through, arm snaking behind him boneless as a boa constrictor to pull the door shut. "That'll learn you to take off without telling me where you're going," Hafidha says, softly, but not so softly he won't hear.

He stops like she's zapped him with a freeze ray. Slowly, he leans back through the gapping door, and gives her puppy dog eyebrows. "How long will the punishment continue?"

"Until I'm not mad anymore," she says, smiling to soften it. "I still love you."

He nods. "Okay. Fair." And then, in the midst of vanishing like a Cheshire Cat again, he pauses. "Besides. Neither one of us has ever fallen into bed with you, and you're hotter and more competent than three Kay Baylors. So there."

The door clicks shut behind him while she's still working on her retort. Which is just as well, because she isn't sure she's up to spurious claims of romantic interest in Stephen Reyes, even for so noble a purpose as yanking her little brother's chain.

Hafidha smiles. She's sure now. They're going to be okay.

In two weeks on *Shadow Unit*...

As Caroline walked forward to cast down the first fistful of dirt, Hafidha's phone buzzed against her thigh. She jumped, not sure if she were furious or relieved for the distraction. She knew already who was calling and what the text message would be before she slid her hand into her pocket and pulled out the device.

The LCD screen said, *Wtf. Sorry. It cant wait.*

Hafidha closed her eyes, just for a second. *A distraction. Somebody is having a worse day than me. Thank God.*

*

A typical Missouri roadside, the black interstate sizzling along between fields broken up by narrow lines of cottonwood trees. A couple of heavy-duty orange waste bags dotted the sunburned grass.

"This is likely not the dump site," Falkner said.

"Likely?" That got Brady's attention. "Why the slide, then?"

Pauley leaned forward, paper crinkling under his elbows. "Because the dump sites have not been precisely identified."

Worth swiveled in her chair and gave him a skeptical look. "How can you not know where the bodies were dumped?"

*

"Nine one one. What is the nature of your emergency?"

Out of the noise, a male voice, smug and comfortable through the distortion of some sort of electronic device. Hafidha hated him from the word *go*.

He said, "I'm calling about Roze Cutler."

"Yes, sir."

"I have information on her whereabouts. But I'm afraid you were too slow. You'll find her in several places."

-- from "Wind-Up Boogeyman" by Elizabeth Bear

standuponit's LiveJournal, Oct. 31st, 2008

standuponit WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.

Coyotes with habits get trapped and shot.

location: Happy Halloween!

mood: happy birthday to me.

music: Shane! Come back, Shane!

Sometimes, when you can't be who you used to be, what works is to change everything. Sometimes, the urge to change everything is part of the pattern that needs to be changed.

I've got a whole bunch of habits that need to be changed, and one of them is the habit of letting go, of not having any habits. I'm too good at it. I always have been.

My life doesn't have chapters, like a novel. It's been an anthology. Individual short stories, with a beginning and a middle and an end, and the only way

they ever connected was because they happened to lie between the same covers.

You carry a hook knife, and if you ever get tangled you just slash yourself free.

That stops now, I guess. Even if it means facing things I never wanted to have to learn to face.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Nov. 11th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

[locked] Dream Journal

- Nov. 11th, 2008 at 3:45 PM

All right, unconscious mind. We're coming to an accommodation. If the dreams are you cleaning house, putting stuff we don't need anymore out on the curb for pickup, then it makes sense to release them, doesn't it?

They can go in this guy's journal. And then I can make brownies.

I'm not going to go all the way back. Just the last couple of weeks, and just the ones that fit the pattern of UNSUB me (i.e. not the bog-standard nightmares, because I'm too lazy to write all those up and really, they're mostly true to life anyway).

October 22, 2008

It's a cold room I in the dream (I-victim, I mean) don't recognize. I-dreamer recognize it from scene photos. The case is Joshua Lynch, a pedophile and killer I was helping work for Down The Hall. (My brain will introduce real details for verisimilitude.) I am tied into a hard wooden chair with clothesline or some other coarse rope. A vigilante (also in the dream, played

by me) replays my trauma and my crimes for me, and then as dream-I-he is about to garrote other dream-me, I wake up.

October 23, 2008

I'm in the hotel room I fell asleep in, on the bed, and Reyes faces me from across the room. He sits in a wooden chair. He wants something from me I can't give. And then I'm him, in the chair, chained to the chair, and the chair is empty.

The Relative is there. I'm him; there's no me in the mirror. Then there is, the me... the me with the wings. And he's behind me/William. He strangles us with a ligature.

October 26, 2008

I'm at Quantico, in my dorm. Again with the ropes, again with the wooden chair. One of my classmates is a gamma and he's managed to get the drop on me and get me alone. He taunts me with the knowledge that he's here, in the midst of hundreds of FBI agents, and no one suspects a thing--and that I'll never get to tell anyone. I'll die with the knowledge that could have saved them. Of course, he's also me. Pretty obviously a conflation of current events, the standard dream architecture, and Certain Events of December 2007.

November 11, 2008

Last night's, I'm pretty sure, has something to do with traumatic childhood memories of the animated *Watership Down*. Again, there was the chair. Again the rope. But this time the room was familiar to dream-me. Somebody was standing behind him, pressing down on his shoulders, pressing him into the chair--(we remembered the chair)--and hissing in his ear, "So how does it feel to be domesticated?" in the same voice the cat

used on Hazel-rah when it was about to try and eat him. ("Can you run? I think not!") This time, I/he didn't see the person conducting the interrogation, but the voice is mine. Except it's mine not the way your voice sounds inside your head, but the stranger's-voice you hear on an answering machine.

- Current Mood: calm

Tags:

- dream journal

Hafidha Gates' LiveJournal, Nov. 16th, 2008 – Nov. 17th, 2008

[My, I'll bet you monsters lead interesting lives.]

[That's not the rabbit hole.]

- Nov. 16th, 2008 at 11:09 AM

[I wouldn't dig a hole for Windows even to bury it.]

[editor's note: a collegehumor video titled "The Matrix Runs On Windows." Archived link: http://web.archive.org/web/20081113122117/http://www.collegehumor.com/video:1886349/]

(Yeah, I love this. But you knew I would.)

November 17th, 2008

[[locked/work]]

- Nov. 17th, 2008 at 3:03 PM

Guys, I have to go to the hospital *now*.

Tell Mom I'm sorry.

I'll call with details when I have some.

- Current Mood: scared

shadow unit

2.05 "Wind-Up Boogeyman" - by Elizabeth Bear

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

Glenwood Cemetery, Washington, DC November 2008

November was the perfect month for a funeral.

Hafidha Gates shoved her hands into the pockets of her violet coat, squeezing it against her ribs with her elbows, and leaned her shoulder lightly on Gail's. The contact did nothing to attenuate a raw wind that cut through purple velvet, the black silk blouse underneath, and the silk longjohns she didn't leave home without between September and May. Hafidha had no native insulation of her own. She might as well have been standing there naked, while tattered leaves blew past her feet like calendar pages in an old movie.

Straps as red as a fireman's suspenders bent under the weight of the coffin as the winch put in slack. The coffin itself--matte-black under all those roses--would have amused Erik. It was the one Hafidha would have picked out for him, the way she had picked out this purple coat for his funeral. She would have paid for it out of her own pocket if it hadn't turned out that his family--wonder of wonders--had money. And taste.

And approved of their crude, funny, hair-dyed, pierced-and-ink-marked son. And the decidedly unconventional women in his life.

Erik's mother Caroline, a doe-eyed blonde impeccable in black wool, had smiled at Hafidha and Gail over the bridge of her elegant nose and said, "I'm so sorry that I only get to meet you now. He spoke so highly of you both. You'll sit with the family, of course."

His father--a small, generous, bearded, balding man who looked unaccustomed to grieving--introduced himself as Frederich-call-me-Fred. The pinch of sorrow at the corners couldn't hide the fact that his eyes

sparkled like Solomon Todd's behind his bifocals, as if in argument with his stern continental accent. When Hafidha came to stand beside him, he reached out and patted her wrist, slipping a pressed linen handkerchief into her hand. "I'm so sorry we had to meet like this, my dear."

As if Gail and Hafidha shouldn't have been comforting him and Caroline.

Hafidha wondered, for a moment, what she would have done--where she would be today--if the people who had nearly been her in-laws and the man she had nearly married had shown half this much concern for her. Frederich Holt's solicitousness couldn't bring the tears, though, and if *that* hadn't made her cry, Hafidha thought she'd be dry forever.

Not so Gail, small and buxom in her corset, high-necked dress, and Victorian mourning jewelry paved with glitter-black hematites, who stood beside Hafidha with her fist stuffed against her teeth so hard she'd split her lip, staring blind through a mirror of tears. Hafidha leaned a little harder, until Gail ducked her head down and made a horrible stretched small noise, pressing back. Hafidha pulled her hand out of her pocket with that handkerchief knotted in it and waved the square of linen under Gail's nose.

Gail grabbed it as if it were a lifeline. Since Hafidha had her hand out of her pocket now anyway, she put it on Gail's shoulder and pulled her into an awkward embrace, glad of the warmth even as she wondered if her own bony self was capable of giving comfort.

Maybe not. She turned her head, needing some comfort of her own.

Chaz Villette, Tricia Andreoli, and Daphne Worth huddled shoulder by shoulder on the opposite side of the grave. Tricia, blond and comfortably curvy, round-faced, snub-nosed, had one arm around Daphne's waist, and Hafdha could tell from here that both of them needed it. Daphne wasn't holding on to Tricia, but that was because her arms were wrapped around each other as if to keep her from flying apart.

They both glared down at the tips of their shoes. But Chaz's stare was aimed right at Hafidha, his mismatched face all scrunched up around his mismatched eyes, and when she caught his gaze the eyebrows lifted. Hafidha nodded.

She let her arm fall from Gail's shoulders. "Are you gonna be okay, cherie?"

Gail nodded, gulping air through Hafidha's handkerchief. "It's just so damned... random," she said. "He was twenty-seven."

Hafidha thought about what Chaz would say--or, these days, restrain himself from saying. That misadventure and suicide were the leading causes of death in males under thirty, with homicide a significant contributor. She shook her head, her braids too tightly dressed today to snake over one another the way they should. There was too much coincidence, and she didn't believe in coincidences.

"If it *is* random," she said, and stepped away from Gail while Gail was still reaching after her. Caroline and Fred had each other for now, and for now that would have to be enough.

Chaz's embrace--when she got to him--was just as bony and awkward as her own. He wrapped long arms around her as if fencing her in with sticks. Between the cold air and the beta metabolism, he wasn't any warmer than she was, but she leaned into the protection with a sigh. Daphne patted her hair, and Hafidha let her forehead fall forward against Chaz's shoulder.

"It sucks," he said, a dry admission, and she could have kissed him for not saying "It's all right."

She turned back to the coffin, safely out of sight under the rim of the grave now. More curled leaves slid past Hafidha's ankles, some slipping and swirling down to where Erik lay. She thought of water running into a sinkhole.

As Caroline walked forward to cast down the first fistful of dirt, Hafidha's phone buzzed against her thigh. She jumped, not sure if she were furious or relieved for the distraction. She knew already who was calling and what the text message would be before she slid her hand into her pocket and pulled out the device. Still, she held it up where Daphne and Chaz could see it, because she could sense their phones buzzing silently too. It was awfully creepy when they all went off at once.

The LCD screen said, *Wtf. Sorry. It cant wait.*

Hafidha closed her eyes, just for a second. *A distraction. Somebody is having a worse day than me. Thank God.*

"I'll--" Daphne started, but Chaz cut her off, his car keys ringing softly in his hand as he drew them from his pocket.

"Drive. Your car needs to get Tricia home."

"Damn," Daphne said, and kissed her wife on the corner of the mouth before dropping her keys into Tricia's open palm.

"Shotgun," said Hafidha. She turned away to take her leave of Gail and the Holts, deciding that she felt enough guilt over her relief that for another ninety seconds, the FBI could just bloody well wait.

Behind her, Daphne was trying to lighten the mood. "Back seat of the Blue Beetle? I'll take fates worse than death for a thousand, Alex."

Hafidha glanced over her shoulder, but Duke wasn't there to finish the cathecism. And Chaz wouldn't answer so glibly, any more. She sighed and folded her arms across her shivering torso. "There are no fates worse than death."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC

Daniel Brady hadn't expected to arrive in the Briefing Cabinet before half the team, but he accepted his luck--and the corner seat between Nikki Lau and Stephen Reyes, sliding it a little closer to Reyes as he settled into it. Lau caught his eye with a small stressed-out nod. Reyes didn't glance up from the display of his BlackBerry, but Brady knew Reyes had registered his presence. Reyes' frown-lined face stayed impassive, making it impossible to tell if Brady's intentional invasion of his personal space was working. Briefly, bitterly, Brady thought he'd be happy if the string-tugging son of a bitch would just look at him, or even lean away subconsciously in his chair.

He wanted to drive his nails into his palms. Instead, he laid his unclenched hands gently on the table before him, ready for the folder Esther Falkner slid into his grasp.

So much for that pressure tactic. But two could play the ignoring game.

Or three, Brady amended, as Chaz entered the room. Hafidha and Worth flanked him like the director had set it up that way, their square-shouldered presence another line drawn in the sand. Chaz sat at the corner of the table diagonally farthest from Brady, across from Lau so he would not be facing

either Brady or Reyes. Hafidha and Worth dropped into chairs on either side of him, Hafs at the end of the table and Worth across from Brady, beside Reyes.

Daphne Worth, human shield.

All three of the new arrivals were dressed formally in somber colors, good fabric, ironed and lint-brushed. Worth had on a black pantsuit, Hafidha a queenly velvet frock coat and a ruffled blouse, hematite jewelry all cold and wrong against the warm tones of her skin. Chaz was brittle as fatigued metal in a tailored charcoal suit that Brady hadn't even known he owned, sleeves of a shirt that actually fit him buttoned close at his wrists. He still wasn't wearing a watch, and Brady wondered if he'd ever start again.

Chaz breathed in, breathed out, and flipped his file open with a thumbnail. Hafidha opened her laptop. Daphne glanced once around the group and then trained her attention on her own folder as if she planned never to look up again.

A couple of months ago, Brady would have grinned at Chaz and asked him where the funeral was. But he'd lost that privilege. Nor could he shake the uneasy suspicion that whatever had brought three of his teammates out all dressed up on a Saturday afternoon--it might very well *be* a funeral. One no one had seen fit to mention to Danny Brady, because Danny Brady did not deserve to be told.

Brady's coffee slopped, a color printout wrinkling in his other hand. Lau, on his left, silently handed over a napkin and continued flipping through scene reports, frowning over each one as if it had been calculated to offend her. She gnawed a thumbnail, flakes of polish decoraing her lower lip until Brady handed her a ballpoint to chew instead. The briefing closet door swung open one more time, leaving Sol Todd framed in the aperture.

"Sorry I didn't make it," Todd said, laying a hand on Hafidha's shoulder as he passed.

"Thank you for wanting to come," she answered, ignoring the contact as if by force of will she could make it cease to exist. Todd was hip to the social signal. His hand dropped away just before he too accepted a folder from Falkner and went to lean against the wall.

Okay, so yeah. If it wasn't a funeral, Brady would eat his Tony Lamas.

That realization came with a sudden, profound urge to turn around and beat the everliving bejesus out of the wall behind him. Or, preferably, his superior officer.

Christ, this was bad. Half the team wasn't talking to the other half. Factions were being drawn up, lines in the sand. Secrets being kept. This was about as bad as Brady cared to imagine it. Maybe there was some percentage in punching Reyes after all.

Daphne cleared her throat. "I think we're all here?"

"As a matter of fact," Reyes said, "We're not." He lowered the palmtop he'd been angling up before him like a shield, staring at Daphne over the case.

She stared right back for three measured seconds. "Who are we waiting for?"

"Me," said Pete Pauley from the door. "I'm sorry to keep you, folks. I'm afraid Celentano wants me to liaise on this one."

*

And at a glance, Pete Pauley could see why. The air of distrust and misery in the tiny WTF briefing room was palpable; he felt it wadding up in his lungs like cigarette smoke every time he took a breath. Pauley nudged the door shut with the heel of his shoe and accepted the folder Falkner extended to him without meeting her eyes. That was the problem, in a room full of people like this. Avoiding eye contact could be just as damning as significant glances.

For a moment, Pauley wondered what he'd done in this life or the last one so awful that he deserved to find himself in a position where his job required he withhold information from Stephen Reyes. And then he shrugged and flipped open the folder, even though he'd already seen everything in it. Reyes would probably figure it out. He'd probably figured it all out already. The only question was if it would change his behavior any. Things had been damned weird Down The Hall since Villette got himself half-killed, and Reyes had to know his people were attracting administrative attention.

Pauley wasn't real surprised that Reyes often didn't seem to like people much. It had to be easy to despise them when you habitually saw through them like so much window glass. It couldn't be easy to like yourself under those circumstances, either.

"Welcome to Chillicothe, Missouri," Lau said. "Where you have a higher than average chance of becoming the victim of a serial killer."

Villette cleared his throat. "Chil-ih-co-thee," he said. "Sorry, the E isn't silent. It's a Shawnee Indian word. It means 'Big town where we live.'"

Lau blinked at Villette. But he was still a thousand miles away, affectless and staring straight into space as if he was reading off the wall behind her head. Pauley liked the kid--had liked the kid, anyway: now he felt like he barely knew him--but he did understand why some of the gang found him just a tad creepy. His thinking face doubled as one heck of a thousand-yard stare.

"It's a rural community, population around nine thousand, in Livingston County. Faye and Ray Copeland, an elderly married couple, were arrested there in 1989 for murdering an unknown number of transients."

"Unknown?" Falkner said.

"Five bodies recovered," Villette clarified. "At least five victims." He craned his gawky neck around to look at her. Pauley didn't miss the way his narrow gash of a mouth twisted before he said, "Faye Copeland made a patchwork quilt out of the victims' clothing."

"According to the city website," Gates interrupted, "Chillicothe is the home of sliced bread."

"So now we know who to blame," Todd quipped from his corner, dry and forced.

"So that was 1989," Brady said. He was still turning pages. "1989 is not an emergency meeting now."

"No." Falkner pressed a button on the remote in her right hand. As the screen at the back of the room brightened, she said, "This is."

Pauley knew what to expect of these images too, but that also didn't make it easier. Which was fine; you didn't want it to get easy. First, the information on the three known victims, as Falkner introduced them one by one, just as Pauley had introduced them to her that morning.

Darrel Edwards, Caucasian, Baptist, married, three sons. Age 43, master carpenter. Civic volunteer. Washed-out blue eyes and hair sun-bleached brown, with a ruddy jowled face that looked like it spent a lot of time

smiling. In the photo, he leaned against the door of a muddy pickup truck, grinning, in jeans and workboots.

Karina Christopher, Caucasian, Protestant, married, one son and one daughter. Age 45, school secretary. Her photo was a yearbook portrait that showed black frizzy hair shot with gray, brown eyes smiling at the corners even while her mouth stayed professional.

...and Jane Doe, Caucasian and in her late forties or early fifties. There was no image to go with this information, even a scene photo, and Pauley knew the next slide would explain why, when he got around to explaining the next slide. A typical Missouri roadside, the black interstate sizzling along between fields broken up by narrow lines of cottonwood trees. A couple of heavy-duty orange waste bags dotted the sunburned grass.

"This is likely not the dump site," Falkner said.

"Likely?" That got Brady's attention. "Why the slide, then?"

Pauley leaned forward, paper crinkling under his elbows. "Because the dump sites have not been precisely identified."

Worth swiveled in her chair and gave him a skeptical look. "How can you not know where the bodies were dumped?"

"Because the bodies were recovered from a tertiary crime scene. At the local landfill," Pauley said, and waited for one of them to figure it out.

Villette glanced from Pauley to Falker to Reyes. Guiltily? Fearfully? They looked a lot alike. Whatever was going through his head, he seemed to make up his mind to say what he thought anyway. "The DOT garbage bags. Work crews--convict crews?--come through and clean up the roadside, bag the trash. Then later another truck comes along and loads up the bags. Then they all get trucked to a processing facility and dumped in a big pile, don't they? Except sometime between A and B, somebody else is coming along and adding a few bags."

"Bingo," Pauley said. "The first victim was badly decomposed by the time they turned her up."

Lau was chewing on the end of her pen. She put it down carefully across the open folder, as if she'd just noticed, and said, "Sounds garden-variety so far. So what makes it ours?"

"Well," Pauley said, with a grimace. "The two victims we have identified had children who attended the same school, which was also the school Christopher worked at. They were both associated with a parental networking website. So they knew each other. Moved in the same social circles. Which is not much of a trick in Chillicothe, Missouri, I'll grant you--"

It earned a ring of tepid smiles, the widest one Nikki's. "That's a heck of a coincidence."

"C word, fifteen yard penalty," Hafidha said, glancing up over the tops of her glasses. "We don't believe in those."

Nikki also tossed Pauley the lifeline of a prompt. "And?"

"And forensic evidence--bite marks on the recovered portions of the victims--indicates that Darrel Edwards assaulted Karina Christopher. There are also bite marks on Jane Doe from Christopher, another set on Edwards. Dental records indicate that the person who left them on his body is one Roze Cutler, who has a daughter attending classes in the same school."

Brady closed his file on his hand. "Is Cutler in custody?"

"She's missing."

Reyes stood up so fast his chair banged off the wall. "Hafidha. Get to work on that website. Lau, Falkner, Brady." He paused. "Villette. Get your things. Todd, you and Worth are the home team this time. Todd, papertrail. Find out if there's a missing person associated with the school who could be our first vic. Worth, get on the horn to whatever passes for an ME in Livingston County and get the victims released to Frost."

Pauley folded his arms over the file in his hand. A shiver of tension had run around the room when Reyes said *Villette*, and it had included more than one sidelong glance at Brady. Villette, however, had no more reacted than a stone dashed by waves. He just shuffled his papers together and stood, head bowed as if deep in thought.

"Twenty minutes, people," Reyes said, as Falkner folded her hands over the remote in a manner Pauley thought was meant to mask clenching them. "Go."

*

As soon as he walked up the steps, Brady realized: the jet felt weird with Pauley on it. Not bad, just weird. Like they were all on their company manners. Well, everybody except Reyes, who had abandoned his usual seat for one at the extreme front of the plane, his shoulders jammed in the corner beside the window and his laptop and papers spread on the table before him. Everything about his body language said POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS.

Well, fine, then. Brady didn't particularly want to *talk* to him. Not when Chaz had dropped into his habitual seat across from Lau, then bounced out again as if his ass were made of rubber before Falkner even had a chance to sit down beside him. He lunged toward the back of the plane. Falkner, who had stepped out of the way against the couch across the aisle, settled down on it instead, her back to the windows.

She seemed to be moving better these days, which Brady hoped was the result of a kickass physical therapist. He suspected it was more likely to be good old Oxycodone, but that too was a step in the right direction. Or something. *Keerist. Did any group of assholes ever spend this much time hovering over each other?*

Rattling sounds followed from the galley, and Chaz's voice wafted forward a minute later. "Pauley, you drink coffee?"

"Black," Pauley said like a cowboy, as he slid into Chaz's vacated seat. He fit in that corner better than Chaz had, but the ergonomics--and the politics--were going to get complicated if Chaz and Brady tried to sit opposite each other.

Brady plopped down on the couch beside Falkner and stretched his legs into the aisle. Belatedly, as the aroma of brewing coffee filled the cabin, he asked, "You need any help with those?"

"I've *got* it," Chaz said

Brady closed his eyes. "I didn't mean to suggest you didn't, kid." Yeah, he should have kept his mouth shut instead, but apparently he was still failing Diplomacy. When he looked up again, Chaz was coming back down the aisle with five cups in his hands, and Pauley was staring at Brady. *Fucking profilers*. He looked down quickly when Brady cocked an eyebrow at him, though, and then Brady realized that Pauley hadn't been looking *at* him so

much as *through* him at Falkner, as if some message in semaphore were passing between them.

Chaz set Brady's coffee in his hand without meeting his eyes, but as neatly as if he'd worked his way through grad school waiting tables, then served Falkner, Lau, and Pauley before putting himself down in the chair beside Pauley, his own mug resting on the table.

From where Brady sat, he could watch the top of Reyes' head do absolutely nothing in reaction. *We can't keep on like this*, he thought, as rich, bitter coffee filled his mouth. Nobody made better coffee than Chaz. *Somebody's going to get killed.*

*

You can't get there from here, Hafidha thought, her internal monologue taking on a distinct twinge of Tricia's mother's northern Vermont accent. Her hands laced together under her chin, images flickering across her monitors as fast as the liquid crystals could change. She didn't look up when a rap on the frame of her open door rattled it slightly. By way of announcing herself, Daphne said, "I wonder if we can convince Frost that if she just checks her email hourly, she'll cut the incoming phone calls by ninety-five percent."

Hafidha wrinkled her nose under her glasses and spun to face her visitor. "I'd sure never call her again. How did it go?"

"Three bodies in transit," Daphne answered, coming through the doorway. Hafidha kept a bike mirror clipped to the top of her central monitor so she could keep an eye on the hallway behind her. In it, she watched Daphne step closer.

She came up beside Hafidha and let the heat of her body saturate the space between them. No actual physical contact happened, and to all appearances, no breach of professionalism. Also, nothing Hafidha had to admit she'd noticed happening. Apparently, an entire team of task force could play at that game.

And if Hafidha just ignored the gnawing ache in her chest long and hard enough, it would cease to exist.

Daphne concluded, "Frost should have them tonight. At least she never minds coming in on weekends."

"Well, it's not like she has a social life," Hafidha said. "Or--wait, don't tell me. If she does, I don't want to know about it."

"You and me both," Daphne said, with an eloquent shudder. "What have you got?"

"Well" --Hafidha spun back to her monitors, beckoning Daphne with one beringed hand. "Surprising nobody, Reyes was right on with his hunch about the website."

Daphne's reflection gave that little bounce off the tips of her toes that made her look like an enthusiastic thirteen-year-old. "So you've got somebody?"

"Damn it," Hafidha said. Her funeral blouse itched her neck, but she wasn't going to yank at the collar, or deign to notice the way the coat bound across her shoulders. *I am Eleanor,* she told herself. *And I can look at anything.* "Not exactly. See, here and here--I got into the server logs--"

"Is that legal?"

"Well, it won't be part of our official evidence trail, let's put it that way. Not until Sol can pull a warrant, anyway, but he's on it. There won't be any record that I looked at this, though, so it's all right."

Hafidha felt the weight of Daphne's gaze on the back of her neck, but didn't turn around. Daphne didn't need to say what she was thinking, and honestly, Hafidha agreed with her. Mostly. The rules were there for a reason.

But while there was a chance Roze Cutler was alive, Hafidha was willing to decide they didn't apply. "Besides," Hafidha said, because the silence was killing her, "it is both helping, and not helping."

"That's very Zen," Daphne said. Rather than leaning over the back of Hafidha's chair, she hunkered down beside it, all strength and easy athleticism. "Can you show me what you mean?"

Hafidha turned her head to look down at Daphne. She grabbed a handful of yogurt-covered raisins off her desk and offered the bowl to Daphne. Daphne picked out five or six and popped one into her mouth, tucking it into her cheek like a hard candy.

"You know," Hafidha said, "maybe I can. Here, watch this."

She reached out to tilt her monitor slightly so Daphne could see clearly, and thought about what she wanted it to show. The server logs flickered up, characters delineated in shimmering color. Hafidha squinted at them. "You're going to have to tell me if this works."

"If what works?"

It was just a stretch, a twist, reaching out through her own vision and into the machine, her awareness of it. Proprioception, as if the monitors were an extension of her own body. She wondered what chameleons and octopi felt when their chromatophores contracted or enlarged, and if it was anything like this.

Daphne said, "Oh."

"You can see that?"

Her hand stretched out, hesitantly, and Hafidha knew what she was seeing. The same text, but now illuminated with rippling Technicolor veils.

"Yeah," Daphne said. "That's what it looks like to you?"

"Every bit of it," Hafidha said. "Pretty cool, isn't it? So from this, you can see that our gamma has been accessing the server regularly, for--months, it looks like, and jamming while he did it. I'm going to go out on a hypothesis and say this is how he's been selecting his victims, all right."

"And you can trace his ISP? And while Duke is pulling warrants, he can pull a warrant for the ISP and get them to give him up."

"Bah," Hafidha said. "That's the sticky bit. No. His ISP doesn't exist."

"No? But--"

"See this?" She pointed at a series of numbers. "Here, let me show you the trace. Okay, what he's doing is, he's using an offshore anonymizer to cover his tracks."

"But you can crack that."

"Already done, honeybunch. I caught him online fifteen minutes ago."

Daphne looked up at her, eyes hopeful. It made Hafidha want to take her by the shoulders and shake her, tell her not to be so trusting, not to let her guard

down, or the universe would get her. Hafidha didn't want to be responsible for putting that hope in anybody's mind.

Daphne said, "And?"

"And he's relaying through hacked machines. I'm working that now, but careful as this guy is...." Hafidha shrugged. "I bet he's on an open wireless network. And by the time I get back to him, he'll have moved on."

"Fuck," Daphne said.

"Yeah." Hafidha patted her on the shoulder. "A worthy opponent. But never you fear. I'll get him with his pants down sooner or later. If I have to go to East Buttfuck Missouri myself and bring the carnival."

She wondered if she was lying. She wondered if it was fair to be comforting, when she knew too well that there were no guarantees in life. But Daphne expected her to be confident.

She was Hafidha Gates, flying ace. God dammit. Never let them see you sweat. And *they* were everywhere. Under every rock. Just waiting for you to let your guard down. To take away anything precious you might bring home.

Daphne stood. "Better make it sooner," she said. "Hey, Hafs?"

"What you need from me, Peaches?" *Please, as God made little fishes, have the sense not to ask how I am doing.*

Daphne hesitated, glanced at her hands. "What do you think about Pauley?"

"Pistol Pete? You and he saved our bacon that time in Vermont, I remember. Are you asking if I trust him with our team's back? Because he's definitely field-ready "

"Field-ready and not brooking any argument about whether he's coming *into* the field." Daphne folded her arms together.

Sometimes, it was better to get stuff out in the open air where you could walk around and get a good look at all angles. Hafidha said, "I love conspiracy theories. You think Celentano is stalking us? Because if anybody's working for the Cigarette Smoking Man, you know it's Vic."

Daphne shrugged, a gesture that somehow wound her arms tighter around her than they had started. "I think he's keeping tabs on somebody. Chaz?

Dad? The Cowboy?"

"I think you're right," Hafidha said. She turned resolutely back to her monitors. "And you know what's the best thing we can do if he is gunning for them?"

Ignoring, for the moment, the question of whether either of them really wanted to help Reyes, right at that juncture.

Daphne nodded. "Our jobs. Ten times better than we have to. So there's nothing to complain about. I'm going to go help Todd with the warrants, okay?"

"Good idea," Hafidha said, and blew her a kiss as she was leaving.

Act II

Farmer's Landfill, Chillicothe, MO

By the time Falkner turned into the knotty dirt road leading up to the landfill, Brady was seriously considering just opening the rear door and throwing himself out of the moving vehicle. Odds were it would hurt less than staying inside, and it might break the tension.

Reyes, in the front passenger seat, hadn't said a word since the briefing room. Pauley and Lau, in the third row of the Tahoe, shifted restlessly in their chairs, as if they might begin kicking the backs of Chaz's and Brady's seats at any moment.

Brady turned his head to get a look at unmarked vehicles parked along the roadside, along with a selection of cop cars and a shiny new crime scene van. "Tax base must be doing okay," he muttered. "How many towns this size have that much police equipment?"

Reyes grunted. Falkner kept driving.

Brady settled back in his seat. Pity that thing about it being the effort that mattered was crap.

"Fourteen miles per gallon," Chaz said, out of nowhere. It was better than pained silence, though, and Brady was so grateful he forgot Chaz wasn't speaking to him. "City. Twenty highway."

"Chevy Tahoe?" Brady guessed. Anything to keep the conversation flowing.

Chaz nodded. "I was just trying to work out if it would have actually been less gas to take two subcompacts."

"And the verdict?" Nikki leaned forward over the seats, one wrist brushing Chaz's shoulder. Chaz sat up a little straighter as her hair swept by his cheek.Was that a sign of improvement? A few weeks ago, Chaz wouldn't have noticed if she'd dropped into his lap stark naked. Brady had done some reading in the past months: one of the first things to shut down in a starving person was the romantic impulse. No point in perpetuating the species when you couldn't feed the mouths already around the table.

"The Tahoe's marginally more efficient," he admitted, sounding so much like the old Chaz that it made Brady's gut tighten. He didn't have to close his eyes to see--vividly--the front sight, the squint of Chaz's regard just beyond. And the way Chaz had looked back at him. Unafraid. Accepting. As if he wasn't at all surprised. As if he *welcomed* the view down the barrel of a gun.

Brady clenched hard, involuntarily, on the seat-edge, but he couldn't restrain his hands from feeling the things they'd almost done. Muscle memory nauseated him. The next thing could have been the ear-shattering detonation of gunpowder inside cartridges, blood and brains soaking the grass all around. Tim fucking Miner and his weasely gloating voice full of sick glee--

Chaz cleared his throat and turned towards the window. "But only marginally."

Gravel crunched under the suburban assault vehicle's tires as Falkner pulled it up beside a mustard-yellow earth mover that hulked unmanned under a cheerful layer of filth. The sun was sliding down the western sky, but beyond the smooth side slope of an earth-covered pile of rubbish burned a harsh glare of floodlights. Brady saw figures moving along the top of the currently in-use landfill cell; the locals were still looking for additional victims. Or additional parts of the ones they'd already recovered.

Falkner hit the door before the engine had quite finished turning over, stalking toward the plainclothes officer standing just at the foot of a great, sloping, stinking pile of garbage, intent in conversation with a thin woman whose black and white dog sat on her feet, watching her hands as she spoke and gestured.

Brady and Reyes had both been waiting for the usual three-count, so the agents following Falkner looked undisciplined and unchoreographed piling out of the car. Brady, hitting her footsteps five feet behind, gave himself a moment to wonder at what he'd just witnessed; Esther Falkner's stiff-shouldered *fuck you* to a superior officer.

The agents made their way forward in a faltering flying V until Falkner clicked to a halt, Brady at her heels and Reyes a few steps to the right. She put out her hand. The detective accepted it, meeting her eyes, and said, "Zeke Browning."

"Like the shotgun," Falkner said.

He nodded. "Distant relative." He shook each hand in turn--except Chaz's, because Chaz had done his inevitable fast fade--as she went around the semicircle, pronouncing names. Another fluttering leaf from a world turned upside-down. It should have been Lau making the introductions.

Behind Browning, the thin woman folded her arms. Her dog never budged from her feet, but Brady watched the plumed tip of her tail stir the dust. A border collie with a black side on her face and a white side. She had lashes like a girl and mismatched eyes like Chaz's, but more dramatic. The one on the white side was blue-yellow split and the one on the black side was doggy brown. Brady almost glanced at Chaz to see if he'd noticed the heterochromia. But then he heard his own voice saying *sheep-dog eyes*, and kept his attention on the dog.

Brady grinned at her, showing her the back of his hand, and she grinned back and laughed at him a little. She didn't budge, though, and when they were done passing notes she glanced up at her handler to make sure she'd been off-duty enough to say hello. Her handler ruffled her ears.

Left-handed. Keeping the right one free for handshaking? Or left-handed because that was her dominant hand?

Having gotten through five names, Falkner stopped. She turned from the hips and said, "And I think you've spoken with Agent Pauley."

"Yes," Browning said. He gave Pauley a hearty grip. "Thank you for coming all the way out here to the middle of nowhere. Nothing brightens up the career of a small town cop like a second set of serial killings, let me tell you."

"You caught the Copeland case?" Reyes leaned forward, reminding Brady of a hunting dog himself, one who was straining at the leash.

"Well, I brought coffee to the guys who caught the Copeland case," Browning said, with a shrug. "I wasn't a detective then." He turned back to the skinny dog handler. Her dust-dulled brown hair was stripped back into a stubby ponytail. "This is Marie Lawrence. And her partner is Cookie. Our go-to dog for recovering human remains."

"She's a cadaver dog?"

This time, with a glance at Lawrence for permission, Brady extended the hand, offering it to the dog. Cookie leaned forward gently, until Lawrence said, "Okay, Cookie." Then her butt popped up off Lawrence's shoes and she pranced the three steps to Brady, her body arched in an ecstatic comma. Brady squatted down to riffle her ears. She leaned her head against his arm with a happy moan, shedding white hairs on his suit jacket.

"Best one I've ever had," Lawrence affirmed. It was the confidence of a mature professional. Brady studied her a little more closely. Sun-leathered face and sunglass lenses clipped on over prescription frames--despite the girly hairdo, she was closer to fifty than forty. Unlike Browning, who was underdressed for the falling night, she wore a suede jacket with brush-scarred sleeves, her feet encased in stained Red Wings.

She cleared her throat. "Border collies are disgustingly smart. Do you have dogs, Agent Brady?"

"Not lately," he said. He gave Cookie's head one last rub before rising reluctantly to his feet. In return, she licked his fingers, and then dropped back down on Lawrence's feet. She must be trained to return there to wait, so she'd do the minimum of wandering around a crime scene. "I live alone. But I miss them."

Brady could just about feel his team's eyes burning through his back. Reyes was mid-sentence with Browning. Brady didn't bother to tune in the conversation. He wiped dog spit on his trousers cheerfully. Lately dogs struck him as a whole hell of a lot more rewarding than people. "Have you and Cookie located any more victims?"

"Just the first three," she said. She turned to look at Browning. " 'Just.' " She drew the sardonic quotes in the air with her fingers. "With your permission,

detective, Cookie and I are going to start working roadsides tomorrow. Maybe we can find one or more of the dump sites."

"I have a list from the DPW of recent road cleanup sites," Browning said. "I'll email it to you tonight, and find a uniform to take you around tomorrow. Do you need anything else?"

"That'll be great. Thanks. Cookie, home!"

The dog bounced up an instant before Lawrence strode forward. They vanished around the earthmover, back toward the parked vehicles. A sharp blue glow and the jingle of metal told Brady Lawrence had pulled out a keychain LED.

He turned back to Browning, only to find Lau at his elbow. "I didn't think she was your type," she said.

"Who?" Brady gave her the corner of a crooked grin he'd nearly forgotten how to bend his face around. "Cookie? That's my kind of girl."

*

As Browning and Reyes led them up the slope of the landfill, Pauley let himself fall back in the group, observing them from behind. Lau and Brady, side by side--Mutt and Jeff, Federal edition. Villette, off to the right, had stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets, ruining the line of a suit that otherwise would have made him look like a politician. And then there was Falkner, trudging along in the rear like a pack mule carrying too much weight. Except whatever she was hauling, it was invisible. It bent her shoulders pretty good, though.

Pauley fell into step beside her. As they came up to the top of the cell, Browning was telling Reyes how the first body part had turned up completely by chance, and then Cookie-- "and Marie, of course" --had located the rest, and the other two victims. Browning gestured into the excavated pit below them. "Number three, the Jane Doe, was pretty far down."

"And pretty far gone?" Villette leaned out over the pit until Pauley was sure he and his nice suit were going snowboarding down the slope, but he never even teetered.

Grimly, Browning nodded. "Our ME figures at least three weeks. The bags kept scavengers out, which was the only reason she wasn't skeletonized."

Reyes said, "In a community this size, there can't be too many missing persons."

"There aren't," Browning agreed. "And Jane Doe isn't one of them. We've cross-checked every local possibility. So either nobody's reported her missing, or she's not from around here."

"Your ME's report said her dentition had been destroyed."

Browning winced, as if feeling it himself. "He thought, with a hammer. And he couldn't get prints. She was a little too runny."

"Our pathologist is a specialist," Reyes said. "We'll see if she can pull something together. In the meantime, that the UNSUB went to such great lengths to conceal her identity tells us that it's important, and possibly a link to him. In cases like this, the earliest victims can tell you the most. The killer hasn't had time to develop his M.O. So we're going to do everything we can to put a name to Jane Doe. Were all three bodies found in this single pit, Detective Browning?"

Pauley leaned his head close to Falkner's ear. "Celentano said he talked to you."

She nodded, eyes front like a soldier. He wished she'd look at him. She said, "I don't deny we've got problems, Pete. It's been a bad six months. But we can put it back together."

"Reyes is off the rails."

He always had been a little questionable. Maybe old enough to have let the sexy maverick G-man image go to his head. Definitely old enough to have endured the Bureau's epidemic of racist hazing in the eighties, though as far as Pauley knew, Reyes had never filed a lawsuit or a complaint.

But he'd also been a genius, a good agent. And Pauley knew as well as Victor Celentano did that if Reyes hadn't gotten sidetracked into his boojum-hunt, Reyes might have been the one to carry the job as BAU Unit Chief. He also knew that the doors hadn't closed on Esther Falkner--yet. She'd earned a lot of credit keeping a leash on Reyes, and Celentano was ambitious. The BAU would need another leader after Celentano was gone.

Falkner was ambitious too, and it wasn't out of the question that she'd step up to become the BAU's first female Unit Chief.

If she ever made it back from her exile Down the Hall. Pauley didn't mind working for women--widows ran ranches--but he didn't have any illusions about how tough a row she'd have to hoe, coming back from here.

That was the killer, Pauley thought--and he thought Celentano knew it too, unless he was projecting his own attitudes on the boss. Always a hazard in this line of work, when so much relied on politics. The gang Down the Hall *were* outstanding cops. Celentano might be a little peeved that agents like Brady, Worth, Lau, and Villette had been siphoned off to work on Reyes's pet project. On the other hand, it kept them out of the headlines, and left the career-making cases for the regular BAU.

Pauley, frowning at the back of Brady's head, wondered about the sort of passion that led a good cop, a good profiler, to waste his life chasing boogeymen.

He realized that Falkner had been silent quite a while, and turned to find her staring at him. She'd said something, and he'd failed to answer. "Sorry," he said. "I chased a rabbit off the trail. What were you saying?"

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Did you find the rabbit hole?"

"Not even a run," he admitted. "Falkner--"

"Off the rails," she said. "You're not wrong."

"Brady and Villette are a mess. Two separate messes. Neither one of them should be in the field."

She shrugged. "Take them out right now and you'll kill them. They need to get back on the horse."

When she said it, it didn't sound like hyperbole. "Reyes," Pauley said. "Victor didn't put you out here to abet him."

"No," she said, and shook her head. "He put me out here to protect the rest of the team. It's a good team."

He didn't argue. He turned away from her and looked at Villette, standing there, arms cupping his elbows, surrounded by colleagues and friends and lonely as a lighthouse despite it. Pauley thought about hostage situations,

post-traumatic stress. The way the kid was haunting the firing range these days. He was going to get somebody killed.

Pauley sighed heavily. "What do you want me to do?"

"Buy me a little time."

"Celentano's gunning for your bossman."

The look she gave him was cold and flat as a knife blade leveled to slip between ribs. "If you have to throw him Reyes to protect the rest," she said, "throw him Reyes. I won't fight you." She took a deep breath, one that sounded like it cost her. "But I'm begging you, don't end his career if you don't have to. I can save this team, Pete. The Bureau needs these people."

Pauley hated himself for it, but he was still the first to glance down.

*

They started the family-and-associates visits just after suppertime, when folks in a small town would be likely to be relaxing at home on a Saturday night, and Pauley drew Lau as his partner.

Falkner had looked like she was about to match him up with Villette, but Reyes pulled rank and claimed the kid's services to go meet up with the missing woman Roze Cutler's next of kin. It was likely to be the most important series of interviews, but Villette reacted by reacting not at all. Another mystery Pauley would have to sort: what, exactly, was the backstory here? Why was the team keeping Reyes away from the young, hand-picked agent everybody had expected to become his protégé?

And what led a good agent like Esther Falkner to think this team could be patched back together? Or even that it was worth patching?

Pauley watched her frowning as she gestured Brady over instead and decided he was just as glad he wasn't going to be privy to the conversations in either of the smaller unmarked vehicles they'd borrowed from the local police department. Instead, he turned to Lau. "Which one do you want?"

"Dibs on the website administrator," she said promptly, reaching down to snag the strap of her handbag. "Race you to the car."

*

Lynn Van Metre--who was a male Lynn, not a female one, according to Browning--lived on the west side of Chillicothe, north of Clay Street. His house was a modest ranch featuring peeling dark green paint and a browning lawn nearly as shaggy, as if it had grown into its landscape. There were no lights on inside, and no car in the driveway. Pauley turned to try to catch Lau's eye as they stopped under a streetlight, but she was staring at her knuckles where they bent around the wheel.

"Want to go up anyway?"

"Maybe he's early to bed," Lau said. "Can it hurt to bang on the door?"

Pauley grinned. "Only if he's got a shotgun behind it on a pressure trigger. Come on."

She pulled the keys from the column and glanced over her shoulder like a pro before she let her door swing open. Pauley came around the car to join her, and they checked both ways before crossing the street. There was no outside light, either at the bottom of the path or over the door, which made Pauley think that if Van Metre wasn't home, he also wasn't expecting to come home tonight.

Lau, a head shorter and one step ahead, paused with her thumb over the bell. "You got me, Pete?"

They'd been pretty close before she went Down the Hall, and he wouldn't have minded getting even closer. And *staying* there, which had proven to be the tricky bit. He still liked her--even more than he liked Worth and Brady, and he liked Worth and Brady. Though of the lot of them, Lau was most comfortable in her own skin. For a would-be superwoman. He let his right hand drift to the butt of his weapon. "Any way you want me, honey."

She snorted and kicked him in the ankle. And then was all business again, as if the mischief had been nothing more than the flash of sunlight off water. She laid her thumb against the buzzer and pushed.

Pauley was mildly surprised when a friendly voice hailed them from within, and was followed by footsteps. The door opened, rattling on a chain, and a middle-aged white man spoke through the gap. "Hello. Who is it?"

The chain, Pauley thought, was pretty unusual for a small friendly town. He extended his credentials, left-handed, as Lau was presenting hers. "I'm

Special Agent Pauley," he said. "This is Special Agent Lau. We're with the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"You're here about the murders," he said. He made no attempt to examine their ID, but the door swung mostly closed and there was a rattle of chain before it opened again, wide this time. "Come in," he said, stepping back. "There's a light switch on your right by the door."

Pauley found it and flipped it, filling the entryway with light while Lau stayed by the homeowner, studying his face. "Are you visually impaired?"

Van Metre laughed. "Honey, I'm blind. But whatever you want to call it. Are you Special Agent Lau?"

"Yes, sir," she said, and let him shut the door behind them.

Now that the lights were on, Pauley could make out the scars disappearing into Van Metre's hairline on the left temple, the fixed and unreactive pupils. Van Metre put his hand out. Pauley reached past Lau to shake it.

"That's not Lau."

"No, sir," Pauley said. "Do you mind if we sit down? We'd like to talk to you."

"Sure." Moving with perfect ease, one hand trailing on the entryway wall, Van Metre led them into the living room. There was a conversation pit, the furniture worn but clean, and a workstation in the corner without a visible monitor. The perforated-looking black device at the bottom of the keyboard must be a Braille display, Pauley guessed, though he'd never seen one before.

Van Metre slid between the coffee table and the couch and settled into it, leaving the loveseat and an armchair to Lau and Pauley. Lau picked the loveseat. Pauley stood alongside the armchair. "Mr. Van Metre, how were you acquainted with the victims?"

Van Metre's mouth thinned, as if he wasn't happy with the word. "Karina and Darrel? They were both in the PTA. I met them through the organization, when it contacted me about building and administrating a website." His gesture took in the workstation.

From where he stood, Pauley could see two other computer cases alongside the first one. "Do you run your own servers?"

"I do." Nothing in Van Metre's face or aspect gave the lie to his apparent sightlessness. Pauley allowed himself to relax a notch.

"As a courtesy, would you mind arranging a little unscheduled downtime for the rest of the weekend? If somebody is using your site to identify vulnerable individuals...." Pauley let his voice trail off suggestively. He could come back with a court order, of course. But he'd rather save the Bad Cop routine for days when he needed it.

"Of course," Van Metre said. "They're salvaged systems. It's not unusual for something to get a little bunged up."

On the loveseat, Lau leaned forward, open and compassionate body language that must have been a practiced reflex, because when she caught herself doing it she rolled her eyes and sat back. "Do you have any children, Mr. Van Metre?"

"No," he said. "Your next question is going to be, then isn't it odd that I volunteer at schools? I'm on disability, Agent Lau. Since my accident. It's very boring. And the school is within walking distance. And yes, of course you may access my computers, although for my own protection, I must ask you to return with a warrant."

Lau smiled. "Of course. Thank you, Mr. Van Metre."

"My pleasure," he said. "Would you like some tea? I have lapsang souchong."

*

Karina Christopher's husband Walter was not only at home to visitors; he had a house full of them. Mother, father-in-law, two sisters, one sister-in-law, one brother-in-law, and more nieces, nephews, and cousins than Brady could comfortably keep track of. His family had folded around him and his children like a wallet, tucking him away safe and protected, and from the moment Adrian Genoese, the sister-in-law, opened the front door Brady was aware of a tiny, unworthy worm of envy. Nobody should lose what Walter had lost, the way Walter had lost it. And Brady didn't honestly think that a table groaning with casseroles and condolence cards made anything easier.

But it sure as hell didn't make it any harder.

The house was well-kept, cheery, though the carpets were worn. If Brady had been staging it, he would have kept the cabbage roses in the wallpaper and the fussy window treatments that echoed their colors. Somebody who lived here had been particular about things, had had a definite personal style. He'd bet, if he looked in Karina's closets, he'd find broomstick skirts and tunics and cute little flat-heeled shoes from Coldwater Creek.

It hurt to look at Walter and think about him cleaning out those closets, boxing everything up for Goodwill.

Brady stuck at Falkner's shoulder throughout. He let her conduct the interviews, listening to the way her voice got less East Coast Educated and more Middle American Armed Forces, and how nobody but him seemed to notice that she was doing it, or that it put Karina Christopher's survivors very much at ease. This was victimology, all part of the process, which Falkner explained in exquisite detail to Walter and to Karina's father, Harlan Genoese. "Everything you can tell us about her may help. Any detail of her movements, her friends, her hobbies."

They'd spent the entire evening talking about almost nothing but Karina, it turned out. And they remembered a daunting amount. Her love of rabbits and marigolds. And songbirds. The time she broke her wrist kayaking and Walter and she wound up stuck in the woods overnight without supplies, until next morning gave them the light to hike out. How she'd miscarried a third child, and she and Walter had decided not to try again, having had a late start on the first two. How much she'd loved her job, and how it had driven her kids crazy to have her working at their elementary school.

By the time they left the house, shown to the front step by Walter and several of the niececousins, Brady felt like he'd gone to high school with her. The door swung shut behind him and Falkner, sealing them out in the cold night air. When they got back to the car, she leaned her head back and drank it in, great swallows, as if she hadn't gotten any in a long while and needed it desperately.

Brady watched until she stopped. When she dropped her head and fumbled for the car keys, he said, "You did a good job of sounding like a local in there."

She chuckled. "I grew up in St. Louis."

He never would have guessed it. But he also knew Falkner wasn't much for leg-pulling. It wasn't much of a segue to the next question, but hey, that's what actors were for, right? To build in the stuff that fell between the lines. "Falkner--"

The locks clicked up. "I'm listening."

"What the hell is Reyes playing at? Is he trying..."

"To push Chaz over the edge again?" She sighed and opened her door. End of conversation. "I wish to hell I knew. Maybe he's groveling. Maybe it's a show of confidence. In the mind of Stephen Reyes, it could be all three."

"Hmph," Brady said. "Think he'll come grovel to me next?"

Falkner laughed, but not like somebody who has heard something funny. As she was reaching to shut her door, her phone buzzed. She had it on vibrate, but Brady saw how she jumped, how fast her hand moved. She was wound as tight as any of them. Maybe more so; at least Brady wasn't expected to drive this bus. And for all the times he'd wished he had the final call--

--tonight he was grateful.

"Falkner," she said to the phone. "Right. No, sure. Are you certain? All right. Catch a commercial flight. Call and let us know when you'll be in and I'll have somebody meet you at the airport. Yes. I'll tell him."

"Hafidha," Brady said, when she closed the phone.

Falkner slipped the phone into the pocket of her tailored houndstooth jacket. "She thinks our UNSUB might be using public wifi access points. She wants to check it out on the ground."

He shouldn't have said it. Add it to the list, long and growing, of things he should not have said. "You know the only person you're protecting by running messages is Reyes."

Falkner turned the key in the ignition. "You want me to stop?"

*

Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, MD

On this particular Sunday morning before sunrise--even before the Beltway and Baltimore traffic became unnavigable, which more than anything told him it was goddamned early--Sol Todd decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He skipped breakfast.

But he finished his third cup of coffee as he pulled into the Johns Hopkins garage, washing down Zantac and musing on the nature of irony. He left his travel mug in the cup holder of the government car and popped an Altoid into his mouth as he locked the doors. The rules of common courtesy might be all different around Madeline Frost, but there was no reason to believe that she liked coffee breath any better than human beings.

He could smell the patient from the hall, and as he came through the swinging doors into the autopsy suite he thought longingly of mentholatum. But Frost would be less than pleased if he interfered with her finely honed senses when she was engaged in a postmortem. She didn't look up as he came along the aisle between the six steel tables, though he knew she registered his presence. He stopped a respectful five feet from the autopsy table. "Doctor Frost."

"Agent Todd," she said. He caught the flash of eye motion under her goggles. She held something that looked like a miniature turkey baster in her right hand, the tip inserted into a slit in the wrist of what was barely identifiable as a dismembered human arm. The limb ended in a discolored and saclike hand, and upon cursory inspection, it seemed that she was slowly injecting whatever was in the irrigation syringe under its skin. A slow stream of cloudy fluid ran down the grooves in the table.

He noticed that she was wearing tissue-thin surgical gloves, not the heavy duty nitrile more usual for a postmortem investigation.

She said, "I've discovered some interesting anomalies."

She had been up all night, but it didn't affect the crispness of her delivery. Or the gentle dexterity with which her own gloved hands supported that of the murder victim.

Despite his better judgment, Todd leaned forward for a clearer view. "What are you doing?"

"After some weeks of decomposition, the body begins to deliquesce. The skin detaches from the underlying flesh. This is a well-decayed body, and it's

possible that slippage will allow us to deglove the skin of the hands intact."

He'd seen animals skinned--one quick motion, a couple of flicks of the knife, and the cook held a naked carcass in one hand and an inside-out animal pelt in the other. This was similar, and just as effortless. A sliding motion, and the dead woman's skin lay across Frost's palm like a second, delicate, translucent glove.

Todd thought of isinglass, of parchment, of shed snakeskins reproduced in gelatin. His eyes watered, gorge rising at the smell. It wasn't the worst body he'd ever waded through, but the stench of cadaverine wasn't free of unpleasant associations, and the aroma of this one had added elements of sulfur and methane, which he guessed must be eau de landfill. He covered the rest of the distance between himself and Frost while she tenderly laid down the denuded arm.

"Please bring me the fingerprint cards and ink from the bench over there? And glove."

He gloved first. Her hands were smaller than his, and her nitrile gloves would never fit. But other pathologists used this theatre. Todd found size medium in purple and pulled them on. He didn't think she wanted the cards on the dripping autopsy bench, so instead he laid them on her instrument table, opening the ink pad for her. It was brand new, but she'd already slit the seal. Frost was nothing if not a planner.

Todd suffered a moment's uneasy premonition that he knew how the next bit of story went.

Her eyes trained unflickering on the flayed skin, concentration like a chess master's. "Now would be a fine time to assess your deities for luck, Agent Todd."

As gingerly as if sliding her hand into tissue-thin lace, Frost drew the glove on. A centimeter at time, with careful adjustments, until she wore the dead woman's skin over her own. "Please stand back," she said, and turned to the ink and cards he'd laid out for her.

It didn't occur to him until later that a normal human being would have looked away in dismay while Frost fingerprinted the dead woman. Todd stood as close as he could, watching the perfect, pristine prints transfer to the card. He shouldn't have been surprised that Frost knew how to roll a finger.

Every attempt looked good to him, but she frowned over two cards before nodding at the third.

"There," she said, with what Todd was tempted to imagine as a note of satisfaction.

He picked up the card she deemed best--and the other two, just in case--and watched her divest herself of her macabre accessory. The process of removing the skin was even more intricate, ending when Frost deposited it in a jar reeking of formaldehyde. She dropped her gloves into a biohazard receptacle and stripped off her decay-streaked gown.

Todd asked, "Do you have any further information on the discrepancies between Jane Doe and the two named victims? Other than the lack of bite marks and the destruction of identifying characteristics, I mean?"

Frost frowned at him through her goggles. As if only now remembering them, she slid them off her face and frowned at him through the spectacles she had been wearing underneath instead.

"I have something else. You know how to use a microscope?"

"Tolerably," Todd said.

She gestured him to the bench with a jerk of her chin. "It's focused. Don't crack the cover slip."

"Yes, ma'am." Holding his hands ostentatiously wide, Todd picked his way to the microscope stand. He had to push Frost's footstool out of the way to reach, but once he bent to the eyepiece he saw a reddish smear of what must be tissue. "What am I looking for?"

"Cellular structure."

He tried to remember the diagram of a cell, but it had been a long time since Biology 102. Nucleus, cell wall. Some other stuff in between. Mitochondria. "Huh," he said. "It looks... smushed. Something broke all the cell walls."

"Very good, Agent Todd."

He looked up. She didn't seem to be yanking his chain. But then, Frost never seemed to be yanking anyone's chain. Perhaps she was merely waiting for him to indicate that he understood the implications, or ask for further clarification. He said, "What does it mean?"

She said, "It's freezerburn." When Todd stared at her, head tilted, considering the many and varied implications of that announcement, she clarified impatiently: "He stored this one."

Act III

Kansas City International Airport, Kansas City, MO

East Buttfuck, Missouri, here I come.

Kansas City International Airport was dead enough at four o'clock in the morning that the jingle of Hafidha's cell almost made her jump out of her trippy little Doc Marten ankle boots. She'd been expecting Chaz, so when her phone announced "This is bat country!" in Johnny Depp's voice, it took her by surprise--but then provoked a smile that cut through sleeplessness and repressed grief. She touched her headset with a fingertip. "You're up early, Duke."

"I'll sleep when nobody's dead," he replied. "I just got out of a confab with Doctor Frost. It looks like somebody kept Jane Doe on ice for a while. Frost got prints, though, and we're running them through AFIS."

The present tense meant still no hits, so she didn't ask. "On ice? Does she have any idea how long?" If they had a time range, they'd at least know when to start looking for missing person reports.

Todd's sigh hissed across his phone mike. "Apparently it's impossible to tell. It depends on how cold the freezer was, whether the body parts were tightly wrapped or air could get at them, and all sorts of other variables. But we know the body was dismembered before being frozen--"

"Ew."

"--and we know it's been thawed for--Frost estimates--between three and six months in the landfill, but she says that's a very rough guess."

"The local ME said three weeks?"

"Frost mocks the local ME. Or she would, if she cared enough for mockery. She did point out that landfills are warm, and heat encourages bacterial growth. However, apparently the bottom of a landfill is an anaerobic

environment, which in addition to lack of insect access is likely to offer a slower rate of decomp."

"She was turning into natural gas." Hafidha rose up on her tip-toes, revolving in a semicircle. Where was her ride? *Screw this*, she thought, and reached out into the airport's network, flicking through security camera feeds until she spotted the legs of a tall, lean man protruding from behind a pillar in baggage claim. It was hard to tell from the angle, but it looked as if Chaz had wedged himself into the corner of a row of chairs. His hands lay slack on his thighs. He might be napping.

He still slept a lot more than he used to. Stamina was the last thing to come back. Hafidha glanced up at the signage and strode off in the proper direction.

In her ear, Todd said, "Bingo. But that does lead us to a series of very interesting questions."

Hafidha glanced over her shoulder to make sure nobody within earshot was likely to mistake her for a terrorist. "Sure. Assuming for the moment that Roze Cutler is a victim and not our UNSUB, we have a stack of them. Such as: if he was pulling not-very-freshly-dead people out of the freezer three to six months ago, what has he been doing in the intervening time? And what was he doing with the time between when he dismembered Jane Doe and when he thawed her out again? Did he kill her? Did he just chop her up? Was her death his trigger? And why has he waited all this time and then grabbed three victims within a fortnight? Oh, hang on, Duke, I found Chaz."

She'd been right. He was crammed behind the pillar, shielded behind his legs like a hermit crab drawn up into a too-small shell. His chin had drooped to his bony chest, coils of hair falling across his eyes. Tight-buttoned shirt cuffs had pulled up over the liver-colored scars on his wrists, something he would never allow to happen if he were not sleeping hard and fitfully. Hafidha stopped for a moment at the corner of the pillar, fighting the sting in her eyes, the speech-canceling pain in her chest.

"It's okay," Todd said. "That's all I've got. I already passed it to Falkner. Sayonara!"

"Sayonara," Hafidha whispered to the dead air. "Chaz--"

He jerked awake, left hand spasming toward the holster half-hidden under the hem of the suede jacket she'd made him buy, half a year and half a lifetime ago. She raised both hands, showing them empty except for her go bag and the laptop backpack with the multicolored stars. "At ease."

He let go of the breath he'd grabbed in the midst of his startle response and let his head and shoulders loll back against the pillar. She watched him assemble his welcoming smile from a kit.

"Hafs. Hey. Sorry. Reyes had me out all night doing interviews with the missing woman's family. Did you wait long?" His chatter covered for the moment when he nerved himself and moved his hand away from the weapon, tugged his shirt cuffs down until they covered the tops of his hands. It was one of the shirts she'd ordered for him, a rich burgundy cotton that made his skin look golden. It couldn't flatter away the hollows under his eyes, though.

He rubbed those eyes and unfolded easily from the chair. Some of the old balance and poise was returning. He was so gangly and attenuated that she'd never realized how strong and graceful he really was until he'd lost those things. Like a giraffe: elaborate, ungainly, ridiculous... and, when you stopped to actually watch it, elegantly engineered. He eyed her speculatively, then swept her into an unprofessional but heartfelt hug. "Holding up? Have you eaten?"

"It only hurts when I laugh."

"I know it's not the same," he said. "And I don't want to appropriate your grief. But I miss him, too."

I'll think about that tomorrah. Was quoting old movies a defense mechanism? Hell, it was becoming a reflex. She didn't want to talk about it. Think about it. *Mind on your job, Special Agent Gates.* She was a bad person for being so grateful that somebody she didn't know was dead. She gave him a squeeze and stepped away. "How far is it to Chillicothe?"

He grinned, holding out his hand for her go bag, knowing better than to reach for the laptop. "Oh, eighty minutes... the way Mom drives."

Hafidha rolled her eyes. "Give me the keys."

*

Hafidha had Googled directions to the Chillicothe cop shop, but Chaz surprised her by directing her to the landfill. "They've set up an on-site Incident Command," he said, and as they crunched up the frozen, unimproved road in the predawn, she could see that he'd understated. Lights blazed through the windows of the single-wide trailer on cement blocks, which must have previously served as the landfill's administration building. The surrounding area was a used-car lot for unmarked cop cars and a few vehicles that looked like family conveyances. A space had been left next to a Chevy Tahoe with federal plates. Hafidha slid into it, killing the engine almost before the car stopped moving. She cracked the door and slapped the seatbelt release, but didn't step out.

Chaz sat still beside her, hands folded in his lap, staring out the windshield as the car filled with cool morning air. You'd expect more bird noise, but on the other hand it was nearly winter.

He said, "You okay?"

He didn't look over, so she let her own eyes glide back to center. "Pretty far from it, actually," she said. "You?"

He shrugged. "No. I'm not." The door handle clicked when he pulled it. He slapped the belt release and got out of the car.

Hafidha followed him up to the door of the double-wide, which somebody had propped open to let in a little air. Brady, of course, stood casually just beside, arms folded, at an angle where he could keep the approach in his peripheral vision. He ghosted back as she and Chaz approached, so they could step up into the trailer without having to cross through his personal space, but other than that he acknowledged them only with a nod.

Poor Cowboy. It was hard to reject a nod.

But Chaz actually nodded back, though he didn't make eye contact. He didn't even look at Reyes, in the far corner with a mug of tea and a laptop. Falkner and Pauley stood at the head of a Formica table in the midst of a cluster of four or five male police officers and what must have been some of their wives. Judging by the evidence, the women had brought breakfast. Hafidha smelled coffee, pastry, fruit. Blessed carbohydrates.

"Oh, god," she said, beelining for the table. "I hope they brought extra."

Falkner and Reyes both looked up as she closed. Reyes folded his laptop shut and stood.

"Hafidha," he said. "We have a driver ready to take you out as soon as you've eaten something." He gestured to the spread.

Hafidha was already grabbing a napkin.

Falkner leaned across the table to touch Hafidha's sleeve. She tipped her head at the tired-looking cop beside her. "Hafidha, this is our local liaison, Detective Browning. Detective, Agent Gates, our computer wizard."

"Good to meet you."

He stuck out his right hand, angling his body to edge through the crowd of hungry cops. Hafidha juggled the paper napkin and two kinds of Danish into her left hand so she could return the clasp. He had a good grip, dry, respectful of her rings so he didn't mash her fingers. She gave him an encouraging smile.

He spoke up to be heard over the chatter in the room. "Agent Gates, I'm sure glad you're here. I hope you can help get a little more traction on this."

"I hope so too." She took her hand back and filled it with a doughnut. Old-fashioned cake, with cinnamon sugar. She was stuffing a quarter of it between her teeth when Chaz set a coffee cup down beside her. Mouth full, she improvised a thank-you with her eyebrows. He winked.

And Browning's phone began to ring.

He had the knack of it, unholstering and flipping it open one-handed. "This is Browning."

The expression crawling across his face silenced Hafidha, who had just been about to turn and ask Chaz to hand her a couple of apple turnovers. She watched the ripple of uneasy attention spread through the trailer, as one person after another noticed that something was amiss and turned to identify the problem.

Browning spoke for the first time since identifying himself. "Yeah. Can you trace--oh, hell. Is it digitized?" He turned, scanning the room, and caught sight of Reyes' laptop. Gesticulating, he managed to indicate that he'd like to have a file sent there.

Reyes nodded.

"Right. Have her email the sound file to Agent Reyes. No, he's right here. No, I have the whole task force. We hadn't split up yet. Yes. Yes. Thank you. Bye."

Browning pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a moment, as if he had to search for the little red button. "Damn."

"He called," Reyes said.

"He called 911. Five minutes ago. They're sending you the digital recording."

Reyes had already picked up the laptop and flipped it open. "He called 911 and they didn't get a trace? How'd they manage that?"

"He called from a deactivated cell phone," Browning said. He was still staring at his own, but as Hafidha dropped half a cheese Danish back onto her napkin and started to reach for him, he shook it off, flipped the phone closed. "*Fucker*."

"I don't understand," said Falkner. "If it's deactivated--"

Hafidha realized she'd just lost her appetite. She picked up the other half of the Danish anyway. She was going to need it. Reyes bent over his keyboard, and she reached out to boost his transfer rate. The wireless in this trailer was a joke. She said, "Even a cell phone with no carrier will still dial 911."

"It's a safety feature," Browning agreed. "But--"

Pauley crossed behind Hafidha, coming to lean over Reyes's shoulder. Reyes seemed oblivious, intent on his keyboard.

Hafidha said, "But a deactivated cell phone has no number. So you can't *trace* it. Reyes--" --*El Jefe*-- "--do you have the file yet?"

"Loading," he said, and jabbed at the keyboard.

Hafidha heard the crackle of static, the blur of background noise. A woman, crisp, saying "Nine one one. What is the nature of your emergency?"

And out of the noise, a male voice, smug and comfortable through the distortion of some sort of electronic device. Hafidha hated him from the word *go*.

He said, "I'm calling about Roze Cutler."

"Yes, sir."

"I have information on her whereabouts. But I'm afraid you were too slow. You'll find her in several places."

Hafidha heard the change in the 911 operator's voice, the professional realization. It could be a hoax call. But you could never afford to take that chance. Like two oxen in a yoke, Pauley and Reyes leaned forward, listening. "What happened to Ms. Cutler, sir?"

"Somebody killed her. You can find her out by 36. Past the airport."

"Somebody, sir? Did you kill her?"

"Somebody sure did."

"Sir, can you tell me your name? What is your location? Sir?"

There was a click, and all the little sounds went away. Before the recording ended, Hafidha heard the operator murmur something, almost too soft for her headset to pick it up. It sounded like "Sweet Jesus."

"He's engaged," Reyes said. "He's engaged us. Where's Lau? I need a live press conference for the lunchtime news. If getting the better of us means something to him, then by God we've got a handle on him. Browning, somebody call the dog handler--"

"Lawrence," Falkner supplied. "Lau's got the sleep shift. I'll fetch her." She vanished through a connecting door that Hafidha had assumed led to the outside. There must be another, tiny, room at the end of the trailer.

Reyes said, "Get Lawrence on the phone. Tell her we've got a change of plan. Also, Browning, I'll need to talk to your 911 operators. He'll call back. When he does, I'll give them techniques to keep him talking, string him along. He wants to be recognized for what he's done. He wants our attention, and he won't be able to walk away from it once he's got it. I'll be very surprised if he doesn't have a police scanner or some other means of obtaining inside information--"

Lau appeared in the doorway, hair unmussed and shining. Her eyes burned red and she blinked hard, covering a yawn, but she was still shrugging into a

suit jacket that looked like somebody had just pulled it off a dry-cleaner's rack. How the hell did she do that? "What do you need?"

"Assuming the male voice isn't a misdirection, the UNSUB is a male. And he's taunting us," Reyes said. "He's just bursting at the seams with how clever he is, and he wants somebody to appreciate him."

Lau nodded. "Okay. Leakage."

"Leakage?" Browning said.

Pauley, back still against the wall beside Reyes, said, "He won't be able to hide his interest in the case. He'll talk about it to friends, relatives, people he meets in the grocery store. He'll seem obsessed with it. He might be able to hide it from law enforcement, but somebody who knows him might notice something. So Special Agent Lau, the Great Communicator, gets on the air and starts asking for community help. We'll show you how to set up hotlines and how to work the calls when they start coming in."

"Right," Lau said. "I'm on it. Also, maybe we can provoke him to call back. If he knows we're listening."

Reyes hid it behind his hand when he smiled, but Hafidha couldn't have missed the pride in his expression. Hafidha bit viciously into the pastry. Flaky crust, gooey cheese, sweet brittle icing. It shed crumbs down her front. She chewed, swallowed, reached for the coffee. When her mouth was clear, she said, "If we can recover the *phone*, we can find out which cell tower the 911 call was routed through. But first we have to identify a suspect. So we can recover the phone."

Chaz reached past her to snag a bagel, then retreated so his back was against the trailer wall. "Right," he said. "Guess I'll get back on that geographical profile."

Hafidha folded her napkin around the remaining danish and dropped it into her pocket. "And I guess I'll get started on that wardriving. Browning, your guy ready to go?"

"Sure thing. Let me introduce you."

Still over by the doorway, Brady straightened up. "Reyes?"

Reyes grunted.

Brady said, "I'm going to see a woman about a dog."

Act IV

Brady occupied the passenger seat while Marie Lawrence drove, and Cookie, secure in a doggie seatbelt, relaxed across the back seat with her nose raised to a partially open window. Brady had often wondered what dogs got out of the wind that rushed past moving vehicles. He imagined it must be the doggie equivalent of a kaleidoscope, a chaotic mobile of scents and impressions. Like kids at carnivals, he thought, and grinned.

Lawrence wasn't a talker, which was a relief. She drove and drank her coffee and left him alone with his thoughts. He had a lot of them, too. He was trying to keep an eye on the landscape, but his gaze kept coming to rest on the marked car ahead--their guide, like they could possibly miss the search party when they got up on it--and sticking there, as if his wheels were spinning too hard for him to process anything his eyes were trying to tell him.

36 east of town was a flat divided highway that ran through harvested fields and scattered lines of trees. You couldn't even really call them woods; like the houses and silos, they were just enough to break up the horizon a little. The flat earth on either side was cut by roads into surveyed half-mile squares. The airport appeared on the left, a tiny facility with one paved runway and a turf one, suitable for small propeller planes.

"Should be coming up on it now," Lawrence said.

Brady pointed down the highway. "Party lights. He said 'past the airport.' "

"There's a lot of past."

"It's a personal referent," Brady said. "Chances are, he's coming from in town. Driving out. Which tells us some things."

"Like?" She pulled off the road expertly, tires rolling smoothly over the gravel on the verge, and parked on the far side of a police car. Its scrolling flashers were washed out in the morning light.

"Well," Brady said, "he has access to a car, for example." He opened the door and levered himself out of the car as she put it in park. "God damn, that's a lot of orange bags."

They stretched along the roadside as far as Brady could see. Lawrence, Cookie's leash in her hand, walked up beside him. "That's why we have The Magic Nose," she said, with a grin. "You know, we know something else about our guy."

"What's that?"

"He's got some way of getting hold of DPW trash bags."

Brady nodded, ambling forward. "Well, it's a swell means of getting rid of a body, I'll give the bastard that."

"Ironic, too," Marie said. "In addition to the convict crews and the DPW trucks, local businesses go out and do roadside cleanup for charity. Guess who was the guy who organized it last year?"

"Aw, no," Brady said. "Darrel Edwards?"

She nodded. "He gave away prizes to the teams that collected the most trash. And he wound up in one of those same orange trash bags. It isn't fucking poetry."

Brady held up his hand, thumbing speed dial for Reyes. Now was no time to be squeamish, but he couldn't quite stop the adrenaline shakes in his arm. When Reyes answered, Brady said, "Hey, I know where the UNSUB got the bags. Edwards did roadside cleanup. Yeah, and it explains why the UNSUB couldn't dispose of the first body until he'd taken Edwards, why he had to hold on to her so long. Because he obtained the means of disposal--right. Yes. All right, Brady out."

When he closed the phone, Lawrence was frowning at him thoughtfully. He cleared his throat, turning away, and said, "Sorry. And thank you. Shall we get to work?"

"One sec. Brady?"

He turned. She looked nervous, and it wasn't just the cars sailing past on the highway a few yards away. He was glad that she was keeping the dog leashed.

"Yeah?"

She swallowed. "Hey. I make it out to the east coast once in a while. Do you want to get some coffee sometime?"

Oh, such a complicated question. Sure, he'd love to. But he didn't want any of the other things the coffee implied. And there were other issues.

"I'm flattered," he said. "But I'm sort of seeing someone."

"Of course you are," she said, with a resigned glance away. "All the good ones are. Only sort of?"

He looked at her. At the dog. Around at Missouri, full of cops and crops and orange garbage bags that might be stuffed with dead people. Oh, what the hell.

"It's kind of on the DL," Brady admitted. "He works for the State Department."

Almost worth it for the array of colors and expressions that crossed her face, speaking of kaleidoscopes. And then she choked, tears starting, and laughed like he'd told her the funniest joke she'd ever heard. When she stopped, she wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and said, "All right then. Offer of coffee stands?"

"Under those terms," he said, "offer of coffee accepted."

Lawrence walked away ahead of Brady as they came up on the first of the orange bags, but he thought she was amused and maybe a little disappointed instead of angry. He rubbed his fingers against damp palms as Cookie sniffed diligently but disinterestedly around the margin of the first bag. Was it really seeing someone when you had his cell phone, but not his home number? If you'd never been to his house? If you weren't sure if *he* thought he was seeing somebody, or just getting laid on the weekends?

The dog snuffled along the verge, white plume fanning gently. Happy to be working, glancing over her shoulder once in a while to make sure Lawrence was still on the other end of the leash. Happy to be serving a purpose. Wasn't that supposed to be enough? Was it disloyal or greedy to want more?

"Check it," Lawrence said, as Cookie came to the next bag. Cookie trotted forward, checked around the edge, and looked up at Lawrence to say, "Nope. What's next?"

Brady sighed. It was going to be a long morning.

It didn't get any shorter when, on the 78th bag, Cookie's sniffing grew serious and concentrated. She dropped down onto her elbows, tail laid flat against the ground behind her, ears pricked.

Brady didn't need anybody to tell him that they had found Roze Cutler.

*

Hafidha kept her laptop open on her knees as the black and white prowled slowly down the ruler-straight streets of Chillicothe. A Boy had told her once that St. Paul was the last Eastern city, having been laid out along a random spiderweb of cow trails, and Minneapolis was the first Western one, with its regular grid of numbered streets and avenues. At the time, she'd asked him where in California he thought he could locate Manhattan. Now, belatedly, she wondered if maybe he was on to something.

And so, she thought, was she. Chillicothe was hardly a hotspot of unprotected wireless nodes. She found more than a few in residential neighborhoods, where it seemed as if nobody locked their internets (maybe in case their neighbors needed to untraceably download kiddie porn?), but the only commercial enterprise she located that also boasted a wifi hotspot was a McDonald's on route 36, and that was an iPass-authenticated site.

"Great," Hafidha muttered. "So either he's wardriving suburbia, or he's doing something else. And neither one of those helps me a damned bit."

The uniformed officer detailed to drive Hafidha was a young woman with a severe brown ponytail and freckles across the tops of her cheeks from time spent in the sun. She seemed almost indecently excited to be stuck ferrying around a female FBI agent, and Hafidha--who had missed her name--was torn between wincing at her innocence, and wanting to take her by the shoulders and shake it out of her. She glanced over quickly before returning her eyes to the road. "Sorry, Agent Gates?"

"Talking to myself," said Hafidha. Her stomach rumbled, and she was out of trail mix and Ring Dings. "Look, we're not going to catch him this way. I have a better idea. Take me back to incident command? No, wait, find me a sandwich shop first, please, and then take me back to incident command."

"Your wish is my etcetera," the officer said, without the faintest trace of irony. Hafidha closed the laptop on her knees and leaned back against the

seat, propping her head on the window frame. Maybe she could catch a brief restorative nap in the time it took to drive over there.

*

As it turned out, she got close to half an hour, divided up into two chunks, because while there were two Subways in Chillicothe, Missouri, Officer Her-name-turns-out-to-be-Vogel--Hafidha snuck a look at her badge when she got out of the car--showed a little human decency and kindness and brought her to a place called the Country Kitchen instead.

"Trust me," Vogel said as she turned into the cracked driveway. "You'll like this better."

"I'm learning to trust already," Hafidha said fervently. She tucked her laptop under the seat and followed Vogel inside. When she came out again twenty minutes later, clutching a bag that smelled like happiness to her chest, she was practically purring. The roast beef piled with mashed potatoes and onion "tanglers" wouldn't be piping hot when she got it to Chaz.

But she was a good provider.

*

Vogel dropped Hafidha off at the trailer, where she climbed the steps with an ostentatious tread. "I don't know if I'm going to make it, carrying all this food up this mountain..."

Chaz appeared in the doorway as if invoked, and plucked the bag from her arms. "If some of this is for me I'll have your children," he said. "Just tell me how many and what kind."

"Only if you promise to raise them, too, and only bring them around for my blessing before their bedtime prayers." Her laptop in its backpack swung free as she passed through the door. Chaz seemed to be alone in the trailer for now. Still, she set the backpack gently under the table, tucked behind one leg. "Tell me there's coffee. The nearest Starbucks is in Kansas City. It's like finding yourself in a DeLorean aimed squarely at 1980."

Chaz lifted foil and styrofoam containers out of the bag, arranging them on the table. "There's six different things here. How do you want to--ooo. *Potato salad*."

"I figured we'd just cut everything in half," she said, hunting on the sideboard for a clean mug. "You want some?"

"I filled my mug when I made the pot, thanks." No fake manners between betas. Chaz dragged two folding chairs down to the bottom of the table, away from his pile of maps and folders and index cards, and plunked into one of them. He pulled over the nearest container and slid Hafidha a fork like he'd learned the technique from a baccarat dealer.

Heck, he was from Vegas. Maybe he had.

Three bites into the meatloaf sandwich, he raised his head and said, "Any luck?"

Hafidha shook hers. "Well, okay. It served for purposes of exclusion. He's really not using a local public wireless node, though he could be stealing from the Joneses. How about you?" She snagged another forkful of potato salad, estimated that she'd gotten about half, and slid the container towards Chaz.

He said, "Take another bite."

"Really?" She looked at it again.

"This is me you're talking to. Take another bite."

She did, a bit of onion crunching between her teeth, then traded him for the meatloaf. He speared potatoes and mayonnaise. "Well, I managed some exclusion, too. We'll know more when Lawrence and Cookie find more dump sites--Brady thinks they tracked down number two this afternoon--but just based on the two we have and where the three known victims played, lived, and worked--and when they disappeared--the geographic profile is all weird."

"Whoa. Technical term. Define *all weird*." After meatloaf followed grilled cilantro chicken. Hafidha surreptitiously reached down to unsnap her pants. Sometimes you had to make a little room for expansion. Hey, that was whyfor the jacket.

"I think he's intentionally skewing it. Taking countermeasures against geographic profiling."

"You think he's *that* sophisticated?"

Chaz shrugged. "This place probably has a CBS affiliate."

"Touché." She hesitated, but this was Chaz. And he'd put up with things from her he wouldn't tolerate from anybody else in the world. *Well, that cuts both ways, doesn't it?* "Platypus?"

"Mph?"

"What did Dad want? When you did those next-of-kin interviews? Nikki said he kind of stacked the deck six ways from Sunday to get you alone all night."

He set his fork down, for that one. Drank coffee, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and got up to fill his cup. As if he couldn't look at her while answering. *Oh, baby bruddah. Don't you know I can tell when you're lying to me?*

He'd put those locked posts in his LiveJournal for her, she was certain of it. So he could tell her things he couldn't tell her, and so she could know them without having to act on them. It was a Chazzian sort of solution to an intractable problem. Just fold yourself up and step aside.

"He wants to be understood," Chaz said, with his back still to her. "No. He thinks he wants to be understood. But nobody really wants that. What they want is for you to buy into their mythologies, not to understand who they really are." He said, "It's why nobody likes profilers," and drained half the coffee in his mug and refilled it without bothering with more cream or sugar. It wasn't an answer, not even halfway, and she decided to let it slide.

She could read between the lines. Reyes had made some sort of apology, some sort of a peace offering. And Chaz was trying to decide if he could force himself to accept it. Once Chaz had made his decision, Reyes would have a plan for how to approach Brady.

He probably had a plan already, or three, or ten, like strands in a spider's spiral house. He was just waiting until he had the information that would let him select one and implement it.

Hafs wanted to tell Chaz that Reyes wasn't worth it, that the job wasn't worth it. That he should find something else to do with his life. *Save yourself. Run for Witch Mountain.*

When he sat down again, he picked up his fork as if nothing had happened, then looked dubiously at the utensil and tossed it into the nearest Styrofoam container.

"You don't want any more?" She nudged it toward him.

He made a face. "No, I'm done. Thank you."

"Chaz--"

"It's not your fault, Hafs. Too much variation, maybe. I thought about it too much and it stopped being food. It's okay. I got enough."

Enough to keep a bird alive. Small bird. Barely. "So Dad wants you to buy his mythology?" It had been a conversation that was going somewhere, and maybe she could get it back. "Is that the mythology where he's not a wholly-owned subsidiary of Celentano & Sons, Ltd.? Or a different one?"

Chaz fiddled his coffee cup then got up and wandered around a little, but didn't go out of easy conversational range. "Someday you're going to tell me how far back you've chased the money behind the ACTF, Miss Gates."

"Miss Gates takes her security clearance seriously, Doctor Villette." That got a grin wide enough to show his crooked teeth. "...mostly."

"Dad's mythology is that there *is* an answer, and that if we find it, we can save everyone." Chaz shrugged--a real shrug, his shoulders rising and falling--and only winced a little.

"And what's your mythology?" She tilted her head up to look at him square. *Come on, baby bruddah. What's so awful you can't tell big sister?*

He rattled his fingertips on the table. "That some things are past saving."

"He *did* save my life." The last bite of mashed potatoes was gluey. She swallowed it anyway.

"Mine too." His frown dragged his gaze down to his hands. His lips moved, but he didn't say it out loud. She thought they shaped, *For what it's worth.*

She wasn't going to call him on it. She stalled with food while she thought. She might have figured out something to say, the right thing, maybe. She might have saved the day, if he was giving her that much of a crack. But abruptly, her phone said "They can *bill* me!" in Sigourney Weaver's voice.

Hafidha swallowed chicken and said "Falkner" to Chaz's quizzical look, then put the device against her ear while he swallowed a laugh. "Hey, Es."

Falkner's voice snapped so tight it stung. "Where are you?"

"Incident command. With Chaz."

"I've got Reyes. Are Brady, Lau, or Pauley back yet? I'm not getting a cell signal on any of them."

Hafidha held the phone away from her mouth. "Chaz--Brady? Lau? Pete?"

"Out on the highway," he said, around a forkful of salad. At least he'd found enough appetite for that. "Supposed to be back by five. It's getting darkish."

"They should be inbound," Hafidha said. "Do you need me to relay a message?"

"I'm emailing you a file," Falkner said. "He got back in touch."

"Oh," Hafidha said. *El Jefe and the Wonder Woman strike again.* "That's probably a bad sign, isn't it?"

"We need to get a bead on this guy," Falkner said. "Anybody comes through the door, doesn't leave until Reyes and I get there. You'll see what I mean when you play the file. You and Chaz start on the phone call, okay? Maybe you can get something out of it."

"Roger, Es," Hafidha said. "See you soon." She punched the red button and reached under the table for her bag while relaying to Chaz what Falkner had said. A moment, and she had the device on the table, open and powering up. After that, she didn't need to use her fingers.

The file was small, which worried her. She cued it with a thought.

"Nine one one. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Someone's missing."

"Sir? Where are you located? Who is missing?"

"Look around you," he said. "I bet you can figure it out."

*

Dusty and gritty with roadside filth, Pauley was not surprised to walk into a council of war comprising Villette, Gates, Reyes, Falkner, Brady, *and*

Browning--but he wasn't quite prepared for the ring of grim looks that met him and Lau when they came through the trailer door. He brushed rust from the railing off his palm and waited for Nikki. Her team, her move.

She made it confidently, stepping forward, tossing her hair behind her ear in a way that still kind of made his fingers itch. Not in any kind of a bad, painful way. Just... a little nostalgic. He smiled, watching her take charge of a room almost by accident.

He wouldn't mind working for Nikki Lau, either. Not that you'd get him into the WTF permanent-like with a couple of good stiff taps with a mallet.

"What's up?" she said.

"Pull up a chair." Falkner pointed to the last two folding chairs unoccupied. Lau perched herself on the edge of the farther one, leaving the nearer for Pauley. "We've got another brief 911 call suggesting he's taken a fifth victim. But that's all."

His reflexes didn't seem to give a damn if goose pimples were a cliché; Pauley felt the hairs rise on his neck. "Have we analyzed the recording for background noise?" he asked. "Maybe that could help us narrow down a location."

Gates spun her computer like a top. Reyes, beside her, flinched at the sudden movement. To Pauley's eye, his face looked gray and ill. *I might be doing him a favor if I got him out of the Bureau*. It was an uncomfortable thought: leaving the FBI was not supposed to be a favor for anyone. There was a *mystique*.

"If we get a close enough location, we could figure out what cell tower he connected to," Gates said. "We do that, we have the time of the call--"

"I could tell you where he was calling from," Villette said.

Browning looked from one agent to the other. "We can put cars on the street. And the next time he calls, we can be ready for him."

Brady shook his head in bemused delight. "Damn, you guys are good. That's ass-backward. Run a cellphone trace without the phone number--"

"Sure." Pauley grinned. "It's not the easy way. But it's the *cowboy* way. Now hush up and let Hafidha play us some songs."

They leaned forward, eight listeners intent behind frowns. Pauley restrained the urge to cup his hands like bunny ears to concentrate the background noises.

"I got as much white noise out of it as I could," Gates said. She must have hit play, but Pauley didn't see her hands move.

He heard the crackle of static, the 911 operator identifying herself. The cryptic threat.

Pauley caught something mechanical sounding. "That rumble could be a dishwasher. Some kind of machinery."

Reyes turned his head to one side. "There's a hiss," he said. "With an irregular period. Like surf but not rhythmic."

"The rumble's a car engine," Falkner said, with confidence. She had drawn her shoulders back and thrust her face forward like an intent setter, the high bones of her cheeks hard under drawn sallow skin. She looked like shit, too.

"Traffic," Chaz said. "Passing traffic. Moving at an average of seventy-three miles an hour." Like he could tell that just by listening. "He might have pulled over to make the call. On the side of the highway."

"Right," Reyes said. "It's a start. Detective Browning, we need somebody to liaise with Highway Patrol. If one observant trooper saw a stopped car at the right time--"

Falkner's phone burst into a Grateful Dead tune: the tinny, attenuated strains of "Truckin'." "Todd," she said, as Gates killed the playback. Falkner answered, eyebrows rising. Whatever Todd said was short and to the point. "Thanks," she said, and cut the connection. "Browning, how fast can you pull an arrest warrant?"

"Tell me what to dictate," he said, pulling out his phone.

"Todd and Worth IDed the Jane Doe. Her name is Lynn Van Metre, of Colombus, Ohio. She's never been reported missing, but she had a record for soliciting and petty larceny."

Browning's eyes widened. "But Lynn is a man. And--"

"What?"

"Lynn is blind."

Lau glanced over at Browning sadly. "Welcome to our world, man. Are you on the warrant?"

He nodded, dialing. Around the table, chairs scraped back. Brady glanced over at Pauley. "Did Cookie find anything like a dump site for you?"

"Cookie?"

"The cadaver dog. Her handler left me around noon, to go meet up with you and Lau on the west site."

"I never saw her," Pauley said, his cheeks growing chill as the blood fell out of them. "Oh, *shit*--"

"Van Metre's residence," Reyes said, heaving himself to his feet so abruptly he rocked the table back. "Pronto. Browning, call whoever you have to call to get a chopper up and looking for Lawrence's car. Hafidha, you stay here and coordinate. Call Todd and Worth, tell them to get on the victim's backtrail."

Pauley couldn't have missed it that Hafidha reacted as if Reyes had stung her.

*

Sure, Hafidha. You just stay back at the ranch while everybody else goes out and has fun. "Reyes--" she protested, and saw Lau's, Pauley's, and Brady's heads swivel in unison. Chaz folded his arms and withdrew, vanishing into the shadows without seeming to move. Falkner, on the other hand, made an arrested gesture forward, her eyes on Reyes.

Hafidha sucked in a breath. Was this it? She could call Reyes' judgment into question now and the team would back her.

Another man might have cowed the room with a sweeping glance, but Reyes kept his gaze on Hafidha. She still didn't think he'd missed anything that transpired. Reyes said, "A word in the back?"

She chose to follow him through into the room she hadn't seen when Lau came sleepily out of it, and found it as plain and cramped as she had expected. A convertible loveseat in rough, tweedy brown and tan had been hastily folded back together, and gray filing cabinets were shoved against

three walls. On the fourth was a battered steel desk, which filled the available space below a dirty louvered window.

"Sir?" Hafidha shut the door with the back of her boot.

He raised his eyebrows at her, betraying hurt with a little grimace. "I didn't call you in here to ream you out. I just don't want to say this in front of the officers, and while I can brief the rest of the team and Pauley on the way to the house-- There's a chance this guy is not going to be at the house."

"What do you mean?"

Reyes rocked on his feet, stretching out the tendons. "Presuming the UNSUB is a gamma--which seems like a pretty good assumption at this time--he'll think he has an advantage. He doesn't know we know he has extrahuman abilities. He's exceptionally computer-literate and he's getting his kicks from manipulating people. Getting his victims to participate in the mutilation of the previous corpses. He's found a way to structure his crimes so he doesn't have to inject himself into the investigation--we came to *him*. And he's got to have a police scanner. Otherwise where's the fun of specifically targeting people we'll miss?"

"He's already in the wind," Hafidha said, understanding.

"It's likely. And if he is, we've probably lost him. I think the best odds for us to play are that he's sitting in his house, surrounded by booby traps, waiting for us to come to him so he can go out in a hail of gunfire. Or--"

"Or he's coming here."

Reyes nodded, raking one hand across the short brush of his hair. "It's a slim but real possibility. And you're the agent I have who stands the best chance of taking down an armed gamma singlehanded. I'd leave you Todd if I had him, but--" He shook his head. "So I need you here, Hafidha. Just in case."

Hafidha wanted to fold her arms and stomp like a sixteen-year-old, but that would put her hand too far from her gun. So instead she took a deep breath, held it, let it out, and said, "Thank you for explaining your reasoning, Stephen. I'll be where you need me to be."

Act V

"We go in hard," Reyes said, and that was that. Brady thought Reyes and Chaz looked out of place in their body armor and helmets, but Falkner seemed at home with a shotgun laid across her forearm. When she breathed in, she filled up her Kevlar. When she breathed out, it seemed as if the larger outline remained there, calm and competent, superimposed on the woman he knew.

Brady hefted one of the Halligan tools. Pauley picked up the other. Lau stepped in between them, arm lifted so Brady could tighten her straps, and Brady found himself the object of a certain amount of scrutiny before Pauley abruptly turned away and went to ally himself with Falkner and Chaz. Okay, so that was one team. That meant Brady and Lau got Reyes at the back door, and Browning's men would have the perimeter.

Brady seriously hoped at least one of the local cops was a competent sniper.

"He likes you," Brady said softly.

"I like him," Nikki answered, with a quick glance over her shoulder at the other group, though Brady couldn't tell if she was checking on the location of Pauley, or Chaz. "I could like him a lot. We... dated. When I was Down The Hall. But the last thing I need right now is men in my life. I've *got* that T-shirt. It never ends well. Look at fucking Hafidha, what she's going through."

Brady shrugged. Lau went out with the betas sometimes, though not too often. She wasn't inside the magic bubble the way Worth was. But she couldn't help knowing more than he did. "What's she going through?"

Lau's chin came up. She boggled. "Oh man. You know her ex dumped her when she converted, right?"

Brady nodded.

Lau dropped her voice even lower, but Brady could still pick out the identification, sympathy, and a healthy dose of self-mockery. "She just started seeing this new guy like last year. First one who's lasted more than a month. Sweet kid, all spiky hair and black eyeliner, stompy boots, attitude problem, filthy jokes, heart of pure marshmallow--"

"Oh, Jesus *fucking* Christ," Brady whispered, his stomach plunging until it swung somewhere down around his knees. He thought he might have met the guy in a bar once, from the description. He hadn't thought much of it: Hafidha never brought the same Boy back twice. "What-- I mean, how did it happen?"

"He got hit by a car," Lau said. She snapped her fingers. "In a crosswalk in the middle of the afternoon. The driver took off. Some fucking planet, huh?"

"Yeah." Brady's mouth was dry and painful, but he had to say something. "Some fucking planet."

Lau looked away. She bit savagely at her thumbnail. "Come on. Let's get on the bus. Reyes looks ready to roll."

*

Brady broke open the back door with the Halligan tool before standing aside to let Reyes take point. He felt like kicking it in, but unlike in the movies that didn't always work the first time, and they didn't need to give any warning. They moved in shouting, every nerve straining, shivering fingers registered alongside cool barrels. The house was dim, even in daylight, but they found none of the anticipated booby traps, and no sign of life.

Brady tried not to strain his ears for the imagined sound of a dog barking.

The kitchen was plain, mostly clean, without too much food in it. Mismatched plastic cups and plates stacked the drainboard. The table was scarred, the hall dingy and painted beige. The bedroom might have been a set dressed as a hotel room, it was so devoid of color or personality. Of course, Brady thought, there would be no paintings on the wall. But you'd expect knickknacks, Braille newspapers scattered beside the bed, interesting textures. *Something*. Instead, there were two shelves of Braille technical manuals and nothing else. This was the room of a person who had erased himself, whose personality had been consumed by a purpose.

Lau vanished into the bathroom, firearm at low ready. A moment later, her voice floated out--"Clear!" and Brady heard her opening cabinets.

Reyes said, "Whatever happened to him, nobody noticed. And nobody noticed what happened to Lynn Van Metre, either. I wonder if that's why he took her identity."

Brady turned to look at Reyes. "I wonder what he did with his own."

*

Hafidha paced. Her footsteps echoed hollowly on the flimsy floor of the trailer, a sound that would have irritated her on her best day. Today, it made her want to kill the motherfucker who was making all that stupid pointless noise.

Her fury did *not* help her stop pacing. She wanted to be there, be out there. But Reyes had looked right into her eyes and said what he had said.

There were a multitude of possibilities encoded in that *just in case*. She'd known he was right, known she was the only possible option to run ops in case Van Metre wasn't at his house. Chaz was still too fragile; Lau was tough enough but she wasn't *an anomaloid*; Brady was too fucked up and also too invested in the girl and her dog to be trusted to stay behind; Pauley wouldn't quite get it; and right now, nobody would listen to Reyes without Falkner. Hafidha hated that he was right. But he was right.

While she was pacing, she didn't forget to check her Glock in the paddle holster or make sure she had a second magazine handy. And her restless energy didn't stop her from keeping an eye on the webcams she'd set up over the trailer doors, either.

She still heard the crunch of gravel under tires before anything came into view, however. She'd thought of dousing the trailer lights, but if Van Metre--no, the *UNSUB*; Hafidha wasn't going to sully the memory of Lynn Van Metre by letting this bastard get away with appropriating her identity--was blind, then he was using some other set of senses to navigate and she'd only be incapacitating herself. Instead, she left them glowing, and slipped through the room off the rear of the trailer to find the back door.

She pushed speed dial; Reyes' number went directly to voice mail. He was probably in the middle of a SWAT expedition right now. "He's here," Hafidha said, and silenced the phone before she put it away. A ring at the wrong time could be tragic.

The Glock rested comfortably in her palm. She flattened against the filing cabinets, aware by the itch between her shoulder blades that the aluminum walls of the trailer wouldn't stop a bullet.

The car stopped at the curve in the driveway, and the webcam over the door showed two people sliding out. The one on the passenger side moved awkwardly, fumbling, groping along the edge of the door. She came around the side of the car, feeling her way, her hands splayed on the fender as if she might pitch forward at any moment. Not drunk, Hafidha told herself. Possibly drugged. You'd want to keep your victim disoriented.

The other stepped confidently, a semiautomatic in his right hand. He caught the woman's arm left-handed and turned her bodily toward the trailer, speaking in low tones that might have been comforting or menacing. His voice didn't carry, but the camera showed the movements of his mouth.

Suddenly, her staggering, stumbling made sense. *He's using her eyes.*

Hafidha closed her own for a moment, a purely reflexive gesture, to calm the adrenaline. It didn't matter; she still had the digital of the UNSUB's approach projected between her ears. The Glock was heavy and reliable in her right hand. Solid. A good friend. She wished everything were as simple.

Hafidha nerved herself and slipped through the back door onto the tramped dirt path. Chill November evening stung her ears and breathed across the nape of her neck. The cold braced her, awakened her. Reminded her that she was alive.

He had the dog handler as a shield; Hafidha would have to shoot past her with a handgun. That meant getting closer, because she was good, but it was still a handgun. *Wildly inaccurate beyond nine inches*, she thought, and considered that it was a hell of a time to be quoting Doonesbury.

Getting closer probably meant opening herself up to the UNSUB's power. She couldn't assume that he needed line of sight--how could he, when he was blind? Just knowing she was there might be enough. A sound. Something to target on.

Reyes would want her to take him alive. There might be answers for Lynn Van Metre's family--the ones who hadn't bothered to report her missing--if he was alive.

Reyes, as far as Hafidha was concerned, was welcome to trade his own goddamned life for as many gammas as he felt necessary. Whatever his reasons were, whatever it was in his life that drove him to that obsession, Hafidha was not going to risk her own life or that of a bystander to bring

home another formerly-human guinea pig for the bossman's bosses. *How high up does the conspiracy go?*

So the UNSUB could steal sight. But Hafidha had an ace in the hole, unless he could also steal that away from her. It would all depend on the mechanism, she guessed, and whether he was enough of a scientist to have justified his power with a mythology about tapping into the visual cortex directly.

She didn't think so. But thinking had gotten her into trouble before.

It would probably be best to test her theory before she actually had a gun trained on her. She worked the slide to chamber the first round, and the world went blank.

Being right about him not needing line of sight was the coldest of comfort. The darkness hurt. But her feeds were still there, the tiny cameras shedding their images wirelessly into the night and from there, directly to Hafidha's central nervous system. Through them, she could see herself by the back door made two-dimensional by a spill of light. She could see the UNSUB and his hostage approaching from the front. All she had to do, then, was cover the ten or fifteen feet between the two cameras. Blind. Without shooting herself in the foot, or anything else she might need later.

And then make a tricky shot while aiming from a vantage point over the door of the trailer.

Okay, piece of cake.

Wireless girl, Hafidha thought, wondering if this sort of thing was why Lau felt it necessary to pretend to herself that she was a superhero. Flesh was too weak for this, humans too prone to error. You needed ancient Mayan Gods on your side, special powers, radioactive spiders.

"You know," she said out loud, "I was expecting that."

The timbre and range of the voice that answered were nothing like the processed voice she'd hated over the phone, but she recognized the gloating, the smug satisfaction. "Come out now and I won't have to shoot this nice lady," he said. "I *know* where you are. Tell her to come out, Marie."

He must have jabbed Lawrence with the gun. From her vantage over the door, Hafidha saw the sharp jerk of his elbow. Lawrence cried out between

her teeth, then gasped, "I don't know who she is. Who's there? I can't--"

"I can't come out," Hafidha called back. "I can't see."

"Awww. A little too challenging for you, getting through the world without eyes? Never fear, sweetie, I'll talk you through it. I'll be your eyes. Did you ever see anything, even when it was right under your nose?"

Gah. Hafidha's palm slicked the grip of her weapon. She shuddered, but managed to keep her voice more or less stable. "I'm a Federal agent," she said. "I'll make a great hostage. You don't have to hurt Ms. Lawrence. Just tell me where to go."

"Three steps forward," he said. Based on the camera and her own memory, that would keep her on the packed earth path beside the door. She did as he said, groping with her toe before taking each step.

"Now turn left. Ten steps."

That would put her right in a rose bush. A test, or a little petty cruelty? It didn't matter. She fumbled her way into the wall of thorny canes as if she had no idea it was there. *Oh, no, Brer Fox. Not the briar patch.*

"Ow," she said. It wasn't as much of a challenge as she would have liked to get the tearful quiver into her voice. The thorns scraped her face, her throat, the backs of her hands. "Ow, help. I'm stuck. Dammit. Help me."

"Aw. Poor girl. Don't worry, Daddy will be right there to help you. All you have to do is call."

He hadn't been like this when Lau and Pauley interviewed him: they would have mentioned it. Everything was different when he had a little power, then. Insecurity, massive inferiority complex. Polite and helpful until he had the upper hand. Just like Ted Bundy.

She watched him from a high angle as he kissed Marie Lawrence on the cheek and stepped away from her, leaving her standing in the driveway facing Hafidha, her hands spread wide as if for balance. As the UNSUB came toward her, Hafidha realized her mistake. She was past the corner of the building. Lawrence--meaning the UNSUB--could see her from here. And Hafidha--meaning the UNSUB--could see Lawrence. But the cameras didn't cover most of the path of his approach.

"Shit," Hafidha said. "I'm so fucked."

She told herself it was for the UNSUB's benefit, but a great cold had taken root in her belly. She'd either have to shoot blind, at the sound of him moving--and risk a wounded gamma, or striking Lawrence, who was still in her line of fire--or she'd have to wait until he got close enough to step into range of the rear camera. At which point, he would be close enough to touch.

He couldn't see her with his own eyes, and she couldn't really see him. But she felt his attention on her with all the dinosaur malevolence of an ostrich. Something that can only see you as a rival, or as prey. His footsteps crunched closer. He walked quickly, confident. "You and me," he said. "We're going to go for a little ride. Drop the gun, sweetheart."

He came into the angle of the camera, and Marie Lawrence was no longer in Hafidha's line of fire.

Hafidha raised the Glock, rose canes dragging lines of pain across her skin. She could shout to Lawrence to close her eyes, cover them with her hands. She could close her own. But shouting instructions would alert the gamma.

Hafidha could choose to take the risk anyway, with her own life and with Marie Lawrence's. It was what Reyes would do. Reyes would try to save as many lives as possible. Even the lives of monsters. He'd risk himself, Chaz, Brady. Lau--to bring a Tim Miner in alive.

The camera did not show the UNSUB's face, or any of the answers that might be locked inside his head.

"I see you," Hafidha said. "*You* drop the gun, sweetheart. You can still stay alive."

He stepped back, or maybe staggered. She couldn't quite tell. But he was bringing the gun on line, and she had a bead on his shape, his voice, his *smell*.

"You're like me," the UNSUB said. "You're another one like me."

"Oh, no," Hafidha said. "I'm so much better than you. You have no idea."

With the roar of the first shot, her sight returned. She still didn't stop until the clip was empty.

*

Shortly after Hafidha broke into the police chatter to tell them that the UNSUB was dead and ambulances were enroute to take care of Marie Lawrence, Pauley, Villette, and Falkner found Cookie in the UNSUB's empty garage, chained to a loop sunk in the wall and barking her fool head off. They also found power tools, blood-stained cement, and a supply of orange heavy-duty trash bags.

"Kee-rist," Pauley said after Falkner had checked in the stand-up cabinets and shouted *clear* back up the hall, sliding his weapon back into the holster. Any minute now his hands would start to shake with adrenaline letdown, and that would make it harder. He crouched down beside the dog and fumbled with the chain clipped to her collar. There were three more chains like it spaced along both long walls of the garage. The space seemed cramped because the inside walls had been reinforced with plywood and layers of Styrofoam soundproofing.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ."

Falkner turned in place, taking the room in. "He had to have one alive, didn't he? To see what he was doing to the previous one. I wonder how he got them to bite--"

"Don't," Pauley said. "Don't even think about it."

"I've got to," she said, softly.

He realized she'd stopped scanning and was staring at him. He raised his head. The dog leaned against his chest, shaking.

Villette looked from the dog to the agents and said, "I'll go tell Brady his girlfriend's okay."

Because of the soundproofing, Pauley couldn't hear his footsteps vanishing into the house. But Brady would be here in a minute. He'd take charge of Cookie then. Pauley stood up, one hand still on the dog's collar.

Falkner said, "What are you going to tell Victor about my team?"

Yeah. He'd known that was coming. He stroked the dog's soft ears and shook his head. "I'm going to tell him Reyes is still one hell of a field agent, and that he has control of his team even when they don't like him much. I'm also going to tell him that you should be supervising this circus, not Stephen."

She thought about it, nodded, pursed her lips. "Chaz and Brady?"

He shrugged. "They're doing the work."

She grinned. It looked like it hurt her. "You think Victor will listen to you?"

"Fuck," Pauley said. "He hasn't fired Blaze Murchison yet."

*

Brady'd been ten steps from Reyes' office, his hands full of Frost's autopsy reports for the John Doe gamma in Chillicothe, when Chaz brushed past him, stepped inside the door, and shut it behind him hard enough that Brady lost the click of the latch in the slam. Brady dropped into a comfortable resting stance.

Something about the set of Chaz's shoulders--up around his ears--told Brady this wasn't going to take too long.

The voices started low, and Brady didn't strain to hear. When they rose--or when Chaz's rose, because Reyes's stayed a steady rumble--he wasn't surprised. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anybody else had noticed. Worth's head was bent over her desk, every line meant to demonstrate abject concentration. She was still a lousy liar. Todd, the only other person in the bullpen, waggled his eyebrows at Brady. *It's about time.*

Yeah. It really was.

Chaz said something sharp, rising, loud enough that by the end Brady heard it quite clearly. "I'm not your protégé, Reyes. I'm not your fucking legacy. You treat everybody on the planet like they're a goddamned pawn. And you know what? Maybe I am going to wake up a monster tomorrow. But at least *I* have a fucking excuse."

Reyes must have tried to interrupt, because Chaz's voice went up half an octave, and another few decibels. "Shut up. If you want to use me, fine. For whatever you want to use me for. But I'm here to tell you right the fuck now that you get to do that because I have decided to let you, not because you're running me. I'll be your wind-up boogeyman. But it's on my terms, and unless you're going to stick me in Idlewood, you'd better get used to it."

Three beats, and then the door jerked open and Chaz stalked through it, breathing hard, eyes rimmed with white all the way around the iris. Brady winced in anticipation of the slam, but the door closed softly, softly, and

Chaz stood holding the handle for a second, breathing like he'd just run a couple of miles. He clutched a manila case jacket defensively across his chest.

Chaz looked over at Brady and straightened up, shoulders back. Brady braced for impact.

Chaz took his hand off Reyes's doorknob and said, "You might want to give him five minutes before you bring him those autopsy reports."

Brady looked down at the thumb drive and the folders. "There's nothing in it anyway. Blind as a result of a gunshot wound to the head approximately five years ago. Still no ID. Still no *idea*, either, where he's been or what he's been doing since he killed Lynn Van Metre. If he's even the one who killed Lynn Van Metre. Maybe somebody else did, and he was just... keeping her around. There was a little shrine to her in the attic crawlspace. A fireproof box with an old yearbook photo, a pair of earrings, and a bullet." He shrugged. "A riddle wrapped inside an enigma."

"Bet the gunshot wound was the primary trauma," Chaz said, with a faraway expression.

Almost dreamy, Brady thought, and killed that line of conjecture with extreme prejudice.

Chaz continued, "Thus the mythology. Bet he lost his family. Bet nobody cared."

"That gives us the victims." Brady weighed the folders in his hand. "Maybe we'll find out someday."

"I hate not knowing."

"Todd said he'd try for a backtrail. He's got a theory that the UNSUB is somehow connected to Van Metre."

"If it's there," Chaz said, "he'll find it." He started forward, but when his hand dropped to his side he blinked, as if only now remembering the jacket in it. He stared at the oaktag folder for a moment before thrusting it at Brady, abruptly as a kid offering a lick of his ice cream cone. "You want to read this."

Brady raised an eyebrow, but juggled the stuff in his hands until he could take it. He read the name on the label out loud, superstitiously. "Miner, Timothy. Our favorite rasher of turkey bacon."

"Idlewood intake report," Chaz said. "It looks-- It looks like he does have an external manifestation after all."

Brady could have opened the folder and read, but Chaz was talking, and that was a precious commodity. "Might as well spare me the suspense."

"Staff who come in close proximity to him report irritability, frustration, snappishness, despair. Even violent or self-harming urges. Doctor Casey arranged for some tests: it looks like he's somehow elevating levels of cortisol, GH, norepinephrine. It lasts for about seventy-two hours, just like any crisis response."

"Let me guess. Coupled with a crash in serotonin levels?"

"He's a one-man gender-nonspecific PMS epidemic."

That was a real smile, not a grimace. Brady couldn't remember the last time he'd seen one of those on Chaz. He picked up the riff: "A personal fucking stressfest. A full moon during finals week all by his lonesome."

"The full moon thing is probably an urban legend," Chaz said distractedly. "Anyway, I thought you should know." Awkwardly, without any of the usual signals of social disengagement, he lurched forward, as if to brush past Brady, to go back to his desk. He made it three steps before he stopped. He lowered his voice below the range where Todd and Worth would be able to pick it out, and without looking over his shoulder, he said, "You know, you saved my life in Texas."

"Pardon?"

"I kept thinking about the arguments we were going to have when I got back. And about how things could be worse, even if they were bad. It kept me going."

How did you answer that? Brady settled for a simple, unhelpful, "Oh."

"What?"

"I thought that too."

"About arguing?"

"No. About how--when I saw what he'd done to you. What you--"

"What I did to him."

"Yeah." Brady looked down at his hands. "I thought it could have been worse, what ha-- what Andre did to me."

And that was Chaz's turn. "Oh."

What the hell, Brady thought. It was working out for him so far. "What you said to Reyes in there--"

"You heard?"

"Chaz, the moon heard."

"Oh."

"Promise me something."

Now Chaz turned back, and even met his gaze. "Let me know what it is first."

"If you think--if you suspect something's happening. Ask for help?"

Chaz just looked at him, mismatched eyes flat and surfacy, his smile giving away nothing at all. "You mean, if I'm turning into a monster."

"I guess I do. Yeah."

"You can't save Andre by saving me, Brady."

"Do you think I don't know that?"

Chaz snorted. "I am a monster. I am the monster who exists to oppose other monsters."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Chaz straightened up, then collapsed. His shoulders hunched forward defensively as he dusted his hands on his corduroys, elbows pressed to his ribs. "I read it in a book once. What's the matter, don't you like it?"

He started to shuffle away, carpet rubbing under his footsteps, but Brady stopped him with his voice. And then was a little surprised it worked, that Chaz wasn't already gone beyond calling back. "Chaz. I'm sorry."

This time when he looked back, he smiled. "Yeah. Me too."

Brady offered the next sentence as if coaxing a wild thing closer. "It could have been worse."

Chaz looked back over his shoulder just once before he moved away. "It always could."

*

In his car, Brady reached for his cell phone without even thinking about it. But it was Monday night. The rule was, he didn't call until Thursday. The rule was, they saw each other once a week.

How'd that rule gotten written, anyway? Was it his rule or Gray's? It occurred to him that he didn't know. And there was probably no point in trying to figure it out.

He typed in the number, wondering why he hadn't put it in his contacts yet.

It rang twice, three times. *I'm interrupting work. He's going to let it go to voicemail.*

"Danny? Everything okay?"

A warm voice, a little concerned. Businesslike, of course; he was breaking Rule One, and calling a weekend shag at work.

Oh, that Massachusetts prep-school accent. He was dating a Yankee. Congratulations, Danny. You might have found something your dad would hate *more* than finding out his son was gay.

"Fine," Brady said. "Look. We're back from Missouri. I'm knocking off early. I wondered--"

A listening silence. Voices in the background, which told him he'd better make it fast and clean.

He nerved himself. "Do you want to get together tonight?"

There was a beat. Sound of papers rattled. Gray said, "I'll book a hotel room."

"I've got a better idea. Come to my place."

"Danny--"

"I cook, Gray."

"Tomorrow is a weekday."

Brady clenched his free hand on the emergency brake so hard he heard the vinyl creak. "So bring a change of clothes."

This time, there was a hint of hesitation in the pleasant professionalism. "You mean that?"

Did he? Too late now, if he didn't. "Yeah."

The silence stretched long enough that Brady was ready to take it back, chicken out himself. And then Gray laughed, just one low chuff, and said, "Email me the directions, Agent Brady. I'll be talking to you soon."

Chances

Las Vegas, NV, October 2008

Chaz leaned his elbows on the black laminate of the bar top, his napkin spread across a glassed-in video poker monitor to hide the jouncing animations. A glass of vodka and tonic, untouched except for the first taste, rested between his hands--rent on the barstool. But he was looking at the keno screen overhead, amusing himself by factoring each number as it came up.

He felt the young woman walk up behind him, the weight of her assessment and expectation--his own mirror reflecting her insides before he caught a glimpse of her outsides in the other mirror behind the bar. Early twenties, blue eyes, sleek dark hair made that way by product, too-pale skin. She wore a tank top, a short skirt, and goosepimples, and she walked like she was wearing heels. The bar was mostly empty, but she slid onto the stool beside Chaz and leaned forward, her elbow brushing his.

The brunette behind the bar, whose nametag read *Chrissy*, studiously ignored her. In Chaz's ear, Trent Reznor complained that his whole existence was flawed.

Ah. So.

"You just get into town?" She raised her hand to flag that bartender down. She ordered a gin and tonic and paid with a crumpled ten. Chaz decided to leave the earbuds in and the iPod on. It was rude, but it would be ruder to waste a working girl's time just to be polite.

"Just leaving," Chaz said. "My flight's in three hours." Selfconsciously, he tugged his sleeve down over the bandage on his right wrist. He didn't want her asking about it. He hadn't wanted Marti asking about it either, which is why he'd waited until she'd gone on shift to do a little internet research and visit The Skin Factory. He'd been surprised at how cheap the ink had been.

He kind of thought people should be able to charge more for their art.

"Here on business?"

He shook his head, and was just about to say "Visiting my girlfriend," even though that would be a little white lie--what was Marti, anyway? Hookup?

Friend with benefits? Somebody who might be a girlfriend if they weren't living approximately 2420 miles apart and he--Chaz--was in any shape to be somebody's *boyfriend?*--because it also wasn't the sort of thing men said to prostitutes when they were looking to get laid. But somebody saved him: a plump woman in casual jeans and sweater appeared on his new friend's left side and said--in a voice that sent a shock along his spine--"Honey, is this man bothering you?"

The girl rolled her eyes and pulled away, leaving her drink on the bar. "How many times have I told you to leave me alone when I'm working?"

Chaz's rescuer held out a new ten-dollar bill. Lip quivering in outrage, the girl snatched it--she obviously needed money too much to stand on principles. As she stalked away, the woman sighed. "Sorry to ruin your plans."

Shaking with recognition and disbelief, Chaz pulled his headphones out and let them hang from his shirt collar. *What is it about this bar?*

"Actually," he said, "I was trying to figure out how to get rid of her. You did me a favor. You gonna drink that, Shaundra? You paid for it."

She stepped back, eyes wide, and looked from the glass to him as he turned, grinning wildly, and opened his arms. It was a big gesture, for him, and she'd know it. He trusted her to remember.

He'd thought she was probably dead by now, when he'd thought of her at all. He'd certainly never thought he'd feel her dive into his arms like a rubber ball shot from an elastic band, round and firm as she thumped against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, letting his chin rest on the crown of her head. She smelled like cheap shampoo. When she gave him a squeeze that would have made him flinch if he'd let it and stepped back, her hair--as dry, porous, and multiracial as his own--reflected the dim light through a peacock luster. It had been stripped out and dyed in layers of green and purple that floated around her like a cloud.

"Fuck me for a--" She shook her head. "Chaz Villette. I never would have recognized you until you opened your mouth. What the hell are you doing in Vegas? Or do you still live here?"

"I live in DC now. I was visiting an old friend," he said. "Two old friends, I guess." He was about to nudge the drink towards her and say, "You still drink gin?" when something stopped him.

When he'd known her, she would drink anything she could get--drink it, smoke it, shoot it into her arm. She'd turned tricks for the money. Not down here on the Strip, but up by Boulevard and Boulevard, in the heart of the North Las Vegas slums where they'd been fostered together. She'd given him a cheap, fancy watch for his fifteenth birthday. He'd known she must have stolen it from a john, and he hadn't cared.

It was the thought that counted.

But now she didn't look strung out and she didn't stink of booze. Freaks didn't get chubby, and she wasn't missing any more teeth than she had been at seventeen.

She settled onto the stool beside him and shoved the booze away with the back of her hand. "I got clean. Hey, can I buy you lunch? Late lunch? Early dinner? You still eat, right? I'd like to catch up."

It wasn't a pass, coming from Shaundra. "Sure," he said, reaching between his legs to lift his backpack and duffel from the floor. "I still eat. I don't have to be at McCarran for two hours. Let's go grab a burger."

*

"I found out I was pos when I was nineteen," she said, pushing mayo around the plate with a fry. "I don't know if it was a dick or a needle, but--it got me."

Chaz started to commiserate, searching for something to say, but she must have read the expression on his face, because she held up her hand. "No, no, Chaz. It was--I mean, this is weird to say? But it was the best thing that ever happened to me. It made me get right with Jesus, and get straight, and get my GED... I'm working on my associate's now. My T-cell counts are great. And I'm seeing somebody."

"Somebody?" He snagged a cold fry off her plate. She swatted at him halfheartedly. Her peacock hair shimmered in the light, and when she grinned, she didn't try to cover her mouth with her hand to hide the missing teeth.

"Her name's Rita," she said. "I wish you were staying longer. She's in class. I'd love to introduce her to my long lost kid brother."

He swallowed and stole another fry. "I'll be back. I have reasons to come here now. And I have a big sister sort-of that you *have* to meet. Give me your phone number?"

She rattled it off, grinning, and he nodded. She knew he only had to hear it once.

He said, "So how do you know that girl you ran off?"

"Honey?" Shaundra shrugged. "She was a street kid. I used to give her crash space, sometimes. Buy her lunch. You know her money never goes to food."

"You still take in strays?"

Of course, Shaundra changed the subject. "How about you. Are you seeing anybody?"

"Not seriously," he answered, which he supposed was fair. The smell of congealed grease suddenly turned his stomach; he pushed the fries to the far corner of the table.

"Damn." She searched his face. "I would have bet you would get married."

"Are you kidding? I get married three times every morning on the Metro. But it never lasts past their stop."

She laughed, shaking out all that healthy hair. He hoped it stayed that way, thick and curly, for a hundred years.

"It's funny," he said. "To hear you say that. About finding out you were pos. I had--" He shook his head. "I had a blood exposure. I'm still waiting to find out. And here you reappear from the past--"

"I'd say something about the Lord working in mysterious ways, but I don't want to watch you try to slide out of the booth without me noticing." She reached out and pushed his nose like an elevator button. "It'll work out. Whatever happens. It'll work out somehow. Have faith."

"Faith is what I'm scared of," he said, and when she raised her eyebrows, shook his head. "Nevermind. So what are you studying?"

"Social work," she said. She looked down at her plate, then made herself raise her eyes again. "What the hell, right? It's not like we don't know how the game is played."

Answers

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. November 2008

Chaz could get absorbed in the stats, but never really *lost*. Statistics were relationships between numbers, each one connected by a thread to the next. Multiple homicides committed by women over forty with no previous record of violence; he followed the turns, winding the thread into a ball, trusting he'd arrive at the center of the maze where the commonalities became a pattern and the map of the labyrinth lay clear in his head.

But he could be lost enough to forget the desk in front of him, the chair he sat on, the fragile meat he lived in and whatever it was heir to. It took the ring of his cell phone to yank him from the maze.

The generic ring.

He recognized the calling number. For an instant he considered not answering. But if he let it ring, Todd would tilt his head over the barrier between their desks and lift his eyebrows. Daphne would spin her chair and say, "Hey, Platypus! Your AOP is lonesome." Brady and Falkner would raise their eyes from the file they hovered over by Falkner's door, looking for the source of the sound, and when they found it, they'd put another check next to "weird behavior" in the Chaz Log.

Or he could silence the ring. They'd all still wonder why he hadn't answered.

"Chaz Villette," he said into the phone, trying for a reasonable volume that didn't carry. (He should have answered with "Hello." That would be more like a casual call. Who answered their personal phone with their full name?)

"Dr. Villette? This is Adriana from Dr. Petovski's office. We have the results from your blood test."

She didn't pause on purpose. But brains work faster than muscles. In the space of her inhale, Chaz saw the two possibilities branching like corridors in a maze, both marked with thread. In one, Adriana would ask him to come in to the office. Ahead lay the impossible conversations with Hafs and Daphne and Falkner, the phone call to Marti in Las Vegas, a lifetime of accommodation to the fragility of his meatpuppet and no guarantees.

Along the other corridor--

"They're negative," Adriana finished. She sounded professional and brisk, as she should. But Chaz heard the unspoken congratulations, the vicarious relief. Sometimes she had to lead someone down the other passage, but this wasn't that call, and she was glad of it.

"We'll need to test again in six months. But a change in results after this point is very unlikely. You should continue to take reasonable precautions, of course--"

"Yes," he said, because he thought he ought to say something, and reasonable precautions, Jesus, who didn't?

No, don't go there.

"Do you want to schedule with the lab now?"

That *was* a pause; he was supposed to answer. But he felt woozy, hot all over, his throat tight and aching.

"Or you could do it later? Closer to the, to the six months..."

"Later." It came out in a croak. "Thank you."

Adriana said something after that, a polite phrase to end the call, but Chaz wasn't paying attention. The sensation in his ears was a little like buzzing, a little like ringing, and not quite either.

He disconnected. He stared at the shiny screen, the mosaic of bright-colored apps; then, prompted by something he almost recognized, he shut the phone off.

Pressure in his chest pushed against his lungs, his ribs, his esophagus and windpipe. The air around him pressed his skin against muscle and bone, as if he were a diver swimming too deep. He held onto the edge of his desk, stood, wobbled away from his chair.

The bullpen was suddenly too big, too open; he stood exposed in all that space. *Walk. Don't hurry.* The door to the hall rose up in front of him, but he got his stiff hand to curve around the latch, leaned back, and his weight was enough to open it. He stumbled through into the corridor.

Whatever was in his chest was forcing itself up his throat. The men's room lay on his left--the bathrooms the team considered theirs. He lunged to the right. The thing that made him turn off the phone urged him not to be where anyone might look for him.

One flight down an echoing concrete stairwell and out into another hall, to a door marked with a pictographic man. Chaz half-fell through it into the empty tiled bathroom, staggered past the sinks and into a stall.

He sank to his knees in front of the toilet. But what came out his mouth was a spasm of air, as if he'd been punched in the stomach. Then another, and another, like coughing, so close together he couldn't draw a whole breath. He tried to hold them back, but tensing his throat only gave them sound. Harsh, rasping, each one like a response to a blow from inside him.

Crying. He was crying.

He slumped down on the tile floor, his back against the stall divider, and pressed his face into his upraised knees. Now that he knew what was happening, he could stop fighting it. Each sobbing breath still tore at him, but when he let them out they hurt him less.

People didn't store up tears. These weren't the ones he hadn't let himself cry when he stood at the bottom of the stairs of his building, holding as light a bag of groceries as was worth carrying home, looking up at the zigzag of flights and landings with weary dread. The tears he'd forced back when he'd had to turn away, shaking, from his own kitchen knife weren't these. And they weren't the ones he fought down the mornings when he lay in bed wondering why he should get up, or when he couldn't face going to bed knowing the next morning he'd have another day to get through.

These were tears of relief and gratitude. That was why they hurt so much, and why they were so hard to let out.

"I win," he whispered against his knees. "You son of a bitch. I beat you."

He waited for an answer from inside him, but heard nothing.

Boundaries

Woodbridge, VA, November 2008

Danny Brady learned to cook from his Grandmother Gilmer, because she put him to work when he came and hid out with her in the kitchen. The times he wanted to hide mostly were when his Grandfather Gilmer was on one of his rampages, yelling at the radio or the television in the living room. Grandpa Gilmer thought *All in the Family* was the saga of a family tragedy; he thought those girls on *Charlie's Angels* were Jezebels who deserved whatever they got; he thought those uppity Negros on *The Jeffersons* ought to get back down on the farm where they belonged.

Grandpa Gilmer didn't come into the kitchen unless dinner was on the table or the garbage needed to go out. Anything with a linoleum floor was women's territory, where sensible men did not encroach. So he didn't hold with Pearl keeping a boy cooped up in there.

"Hank," she'd say, when he appeared in the doorway like a grumbling genie, "Danny's not underfoot at all. You just go watch the game and I'll have your supper done in an hour."

Grandpa Gilmer would grumble back into the living room, and Grandma Gilmer would pull over the rubber step stool so Danny could climb up on it. He'd wash and tear up the salad while she broiled the steaks and fried the potatoes, and he'd feel safe, like this was home base and nobody could touch him unless he left it.

She suffered an incapacitating stroke when he was twelve, and Grandpa Gilmer took over the cooking. He learned to make the food the doctors said was good for Pearl--braised fish and baked skinless chicken and steamed vegetables and rice. Rice, in Texas, in those days, was Uncle Ben's Converted or Carolina brand, and the way Grandpa Gilmer made it, it came out more like rice pudding.

In short, he wasn't any good as a cook, and he almost never ate what he cooked his own self--but he had a hot meal on the table for his invalid wife every day of the week, and he cut up the meat in bite sized pieces for her because her left hand didn't work anymore and she couldn't handle the knife.

By then, Brady didn't need the step stool, and Grandma Gilmer had declared him competent to handle the broiler, though not the hot oil. By the time he was sixteen, and he and his mom were hiding it from Grandpa Gilmer that he was in drama club, Grandma Gilmer had become the first adult in his immediate family to die.

Grandpa Gilmer started his last decline a few weeks later.

His mom, Rosemary, Pearl Gilmer's daughter, was a professional woman with a career, which his Grandpa Gilmer *also* disapproved of. And no matter how much her father raved that she and Pearl were turning that boy into a sissy, she loved it that her son cooked. She said his potato salad was just like her mother's, and told him being a good hand in the kitchen couldn't hurt when it came time to hook a nice girl and settle down.

"Women like a man who cooks," she said. "It makes them feel wanted when you feed them."

He thought of his grandfather, flaking tasteless poached whitefish into tiny bites and hand-feeding them to a woman Brady had never in his life heard him say he loved. He thought about the captain of the wrestling team, and the way the shirts stretched across his shoulders when he pulled books from his locker, and how that made him feel more *male*, more like a man, than any pretty girl. He was pretty sure it wasn't tearing up salad that had turned him into a sissy.

He let his mom teach him how to bake cupcakes.

*

When Brady runs the script in his head, it goes better than this. Gray doesn't show up half an hour early, while he's still in the kitchen fussing about stupidly with the tomatoes, tie untied because he hasn't managed to get his work clothes off yet, and with his stomach in a knot already.

When Brady runs the script in his head, he doesn't knock over an open bottle of Worcestershire sauce and spill half of it down the sink when the doorbell rings. He thinks, *Oh God, he didn't stand me up after all* and *Godammit, he's early* all at the same time, but then profiler brain kicks in and he realizes that to get here this early in DC traffic, Gray must have

allowed himself an extra forty-five minutes at least. He didn't want to be late, which makes *Brady* feel wanted.

And here Brady had mostly been afraid that the phone was going to buzz any moment with a cancellation, and he'd be left with an extra steak and more torn up lettuce than anybody short of a beta could find a use for. And a distinct lack of plans for the evening.

Brady wipes his hands on a towel and lets Gray in, locking the door behind him because his job makes him paranoid. Gray's still dressed for the office, too, all six trim feet of him wrapped in a gold-pinstriped black suit that makes Brady want to look for the ribbons and To Danny From Santa sticker. A brown paper bag rests in the crook of his left arm, hiking his sleeve up so Brady can see the dark hair curling over his leather watch band. Silver hairs sparkle at his temples when he tilts his chin up a half-inch to stare Brady in the eye, and Brady thinks *This is where I should kiss him.*

God knows when it's been hotel rooms and stolen afternoons, they've barely been able to wait until the door was latched. Their relationship hasn't exactly been well-founded in conversation. But something stops Brady this time, one hand half-outreached, and before he can recover himself Gray shoves the paper bag into it and the moment is over.

"Sorry I'm early."

Brady shrugs dismissal. *Forgiven.* The bag is heavy. It clinks.

"What's this?"

"Beer," Gray says, with a grin. "Real beer, not that stuff you drink. And an overpriced bottle of wine, if you'd rather have that with dinner." He steps past Brady and allows himself a slow, admiring turn. "This is a nice house. It looks like somebody lives here."

"You say that like it surprises you," Brady snipes cheerfully. He leads Gray into the kitchen. The air's warm and dry, filled with the nutty smell of roasting potatoes and the tang of the Worcestershire. Two seasoned steaks await their fate on the counter.

"Damn," Gray says. "That smells awesome. And you haven't even started the dead animal yet."

"I told you I cooked. You should have been more trusting."

Brady lifts a six of nut-brown ale and a bottle of wine labeled in a language he doesn't speak out of the bag and sets them on the counter. While Gray kicks his glossy Bruno Magli loafers unceremoniously into the corner and sheds his suit jacket over the back of a chair, Brady rummages for a churchkey.

Gray rolls up on his toes, stretching, and beelines for the fridge. "Beer?"

"Bring me a Coors," Brady says, turning around with the open ale when Gray arrives to trade it for a lager. Brady holds out the churchkey, but the top's off the Coors already.

"Twist-off," Gray reminds, and throws the bottlecap at him. "You expecting a riot?"

Brady takes a long slow swallow of icy Coors, and sighs. "Sorry?"

"You're armed." Gray points to the holster at Brady's hip.

"Just got home and started cooking. I usually wear it until I make it back to the gun safe."

"Oooo." Gray's eyes widen mockingly. He slings a leg over one of the stools at the breakfast bar and mounts up. His beer rests before him, hands caged loosely around it. "Hot cop."

"Come over here and say that," Brady answers, as mildly as if his stomach weren't still doing flip-rolls in his belly. He sprinkles garlic powder on meat. His Grandpa Gilmer never would have stood for it. Both steaks slide neatly onto the broiling pan.

"Hot tough cop. Be still my heart. Do you have handcuffs, too?"

What Gray's doing to the mouth of that bottle, as if absentmindedly, is illegal in sixteen states and the District. Brady pulls the drawer under the hot oven open and slides the pan in, then stands and turns to wash his hands. "I didn't know you had a cop fetish."

Gray crosses his forearms on the breakfast bar and leans forward confidingly over his beer. (If you could call anything that color *beer*. How the hell has Brady come to surround himself with people who think beer looks like that?) "I do have one regret."

"What's that?" *Please let it be something I can handle.*

"I missed seeing you in uniform."

Relief makes Brady cough. "Okay, I don't need to know all your kinks."

He glances back in time to see Gray's slow, slow smile, the one that can make Brady stammer like a high-school kid. "Yeah, you do."

It's not just the smile making him stammer. *Jesus, Danny, stop thinking so fucking much, would you? He's hot for you. It is what it is.*

While Brady's groping for a comeback, Gray reaches into his shirt pocket for his reading glasses and slides them up his nose. With his other hand, he pulls the wine bottle over. "Hang on, let me pretend I read French. Maybe I can tell you what the wine experts want to make us believe this tastes like. Plums? Dirt? Diesel fuel? I guess they can't just say it tastes like rotten grape juice--"

Gray's farsighted, which Brady finds endearing, though he'd rather die than admit it. The wire-frame glasses, though--Brady's developing a history with them. Or maybe he should say, a history with removing them.

As the steak starts to sizzle and pop, he reaches across and relieves Gray's nose of its burden. Gray looks up to protest. Brady guides the wine bottle to one side, leans over the breakfast bar, and kisses him square on the mouth.

It's ridiculous that every time should be as good as the first time. But there it is: Gray's firm mouth, rough end-of-the-day cheek, even the taste of that ass-bitter "beer" on his tongue. Gray slides bottle-chilled fingers over Brady's ear and pushes them through his hair, knotting a fist hard enough to sting sharply where it pulls the strands. He yanks their heads together until teeth click. The sound he voices, half moan and half mumble, goes right to Brady's groin.

When Gray lets him get half a breath, Brady says--against his mouth-- "I'm gonna burn the steak."

Brown eyes narrow with a grin he's too close to see all of. "Is that what they call it in Texas?"

Reluctantly, Brady disengages. Gray's glasses are still in his hand. He sets them off to the side. "In Texas, we have our priorities in order. Food first,

then sex. Then more food. Saves on unfortunate accidents."

"And leftovers," Gray retorts, tipping his head back for a swig of beer.

"If you've got leftovers, it just means you haven't been working out enough." Brady crouches to flip the steaks, but the only way he could miss Gray's appraising stare is if he were dead.

"Oh," Gray drawls in his best barfly falsetto. "I don't think *that's* your problem."

It's a good thing Brady's not drinking, because he doesn't want a lager nasal lavage. As it is, he's laughing so hard he almost drops the potatoes.

Gray watches voraciously as Brady wrestles them onto plates, cuts crosses in the top and doctors them with salt and pepper and sour cream and butter. He decided that a set table was formal. Presumptuous. So he hands down stemmed glasses and the corkscrew and lets Gray deal with the wine while Brady dishes out salad. By then the steaks are ready for retrieval.

They eat sitting side by side at the counter, shoulders touching casually, and Brady's surprised by his appetite. The knot in his stomach has vanished. He floats on a little pleasant buzz.

Gray splits the last of the wine between their glasses and says, "I'd say you cook better than you fuck, but I'd be lying."

"Damn," Brady says, shaking his head, wondering just how much broke he should go for. Sure, they've been *screwing* for months, but that's not the same thing as inviting a guy home for dinner. He starts stacking plates. "I'm *hoping* that's a compliment."

Gray spins lazily on his stool and picks up his glass. "Leave the dishes. I want to see the rest of the house. Like the bedroom."

*

Gray smooths and hangs his clothes over the back of the bedroom chair when he undresses, and Brady can never decide if it's an intentional tease or Yankee fastidiousness. If it's a tease, it works: even after taking the time to put his sidearm away, Brady lies propped on pillows watching Gray hook his boxers down and step out of them, and if his fingers weren't locked behind his head his hands would be shaking. Gray folds the underwear, too,

and tucks them neatly under his shirt, the cufflinks he left in the buttonholes rattling faintly. Brady wants to lick the dimples where the small of Gray's back runs into his ass, the ones that pull smooth when Gray bends over.

He figures he'll get around to it pretty soon now.

The bed dips under Gray's weight when he climbs up beside Brady. He straddles Brady's leg, slips his knee between Brady's thighs, and plants a hand on either side of his head. Brady frees up his hands to tug Gray a little closer. Warm skin and hard callus, as Gray slides a hand around the back of Brady's neck and pulls their foreheads together. Brady wonders what a desk-jockey in the State Department does to earn rough hands like that. It bothers him a little that he doesn't know.

Maybe he sandpapers them because he knows how fucking sexy it is.

"You know what I like about you?" Gray says. Brady can feel his breath moving on his cheek.

"I'm hung like a bull?" Brady says, with a grin, so Gray will grab his shoulders and shake him. Mostly, he shakes the bed: when he wants to be, Brady's a pretty big immovable object.

"You take your socks off in bed," Gray says, kissing him. "I like a man who commits."

When he pulls back, breathing hard, licking his lips, Brady pushes a foil-wrapped rectangle into his hand. "Here," he says. "Commit to this."

*

Fine, straight copper-brown hairs cover Gray's chest, abdomen, and thighs. They trap the sweat between bodies, and they tickle Brady's palms. They prickle his ear when he rests his head on Gray's belly, feeling in equal parts like he's risking everything and like he's just gotten away with the biggest heist of his career. He listens to his pulse racing, blood thumping in his ears loud enough that he can't pick out Gray's heartbeat, and doesn't realize he's holding his breath until the hand that falls on him strokes his hair into order rather than pushing him aside.

The air rattles out, his lungs stinging. He's light-headed when he draws another one.

"Stealth bear," Brady says, running his fingertips down Gray's thigh and into the hollow of his knee, to make him gasp. "You'd never know it with your clothes on."

"That's because I shave all the way to my collarbone," Gray says, petting Brady's hair again. "Just don't ask me to wax. I have a low pain tolerance."

"S'okay," Brady says, turning his head to nuzzle the crease of Gray's thigh. "I like fur."

Gray breathes in sharply again, ticklish-sexy, and squirms. "Have pity on an old man. Hiatus!"

"You weren't offering a lot of pity ten minutes ago."

"You weren't asking," Gray answers. This time his hands aren't brooking any disagreements as they pull Brady up beside him. Brady flops down on the pillows and rolls onto his back, staring at the ceiling. Speechless. Aching, and not sure how to ask for what he's aching for, or even how to put a name to it.

"This was good," Gray says, hesitating, twelve inches and a whole world of experience away. Brady turns to him, searching his face for something other than uncertainty, gets a smile, an uncomfortable, blinking stare. "Really good. Nobody ever made me dinner before."

"You can be dinner any time you want," Brady says.

Gray stares at him for a second and then laughs, hard, hand thrown back across his forehead. His furry stomach jiggles with it. When he stops, though, his mouth bends into a frown and his brow furrows. His mouth works. He looks away, looks back again.

"I'm for it," he says at last. And then he bites his lip. "You know, I'm not out at work."

Brady nods. "I figured that out. Somehow. With my spooky profiler voodoo."

"You're okay with it?"

"No," Brady says. "But I'm willing to compromise. You know *I'm* not out to my dad."

Gray turns his head and looks at him, studying his expression like nobody has in a long time. The stare seeds cool prickles across Brady's shoulders.

"Next summer," Gray says. "Do you want to go sailing?"

It's Brady's turn to stare and blink. Next summer is practically a lifetime commitment, in gay man minutes. "Sailing?" he says, to cover himself. "Like, on a boat?"

"No, like on a flying saucer. Doofus. Of course on a boat. We've got a twenty-four footer in Newport. I can manage her; I had a Suncat when I was a kid. We could take her out. I could teach you the ropes." Gray's eyebrow waggle makes learning the ropes sound distinctly un-nautical. "I mean, if you're too much of a sissy for a real boat, we could borrow the cabin cruiser instead--"

"Who is 'we'?" Brady asks, feeling as if he's just tripped down the rabbit hole.

"My family," Gray says, sounding profoundly bored. "The ones with the gobs of money and the searing hypocrisy. Or--shit." He sits up abruptly, lets his legs fall over the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, Danny. I thought tonight--shit. I guess I thought you were making an offer."

Brady sits up, too. He starts to reach out and nearly stops himself, but in the end his hand only shakes a little as he pushes through the wall of space that's suddenly appeared between them and lays it on Gray's freckled shoulder.

"I was," he says. "I guess I'm just a little freaked out to realize I'm dating a Yankee."

Gray turns to look over his shoulder, eyebrows rising with a question.

Brady shakes his head. "Oh, god. I'm *dating* a Yankee. With an *Audi*."

"Don't knock that Audi. It's a good pony, cowboy. It knew what it was doing when it threw that shoe."

Brady would never admit to the rush of relief and affection he feels at this sidelong evidence of Gray's approval--*Christ, he could have anyone. He's gorgeous. Smart. Funny. Loaded. Hung*.--but he'd bet the rest of the six-

pack of Coors that it shows on his face anyway. "Come on, old man. If you're calling a hiatus, get the fuck out of bed. There's cupcakes."

"Cupcakes?"

"Don't get so excited. They're out of a box."

"It's all good," Gray says, fighting a grin and losing. "As long as there's frosting."

So Open to the Dark

Washington, D.C., November 2008

Even indoors in the stuffy apartment building hallway, Hafidha felt the cold. She pressed her upper arms tight against her, squeezing the red wool bouclé of her coat to the sweater underneath, and the sweater to her ribs. The chill found gaps to get through--under hems, down collars, up sleeves--no matter what she did. The baselines would probably call this the first really frigid night of the season. Hafidha had been freezing for weeks.

She heard voices through the door of number 12, and Robert Smith singing, "Sometimes I'm dreaming / Where all the other people dance."

No shit. At least maybe here everyone else would be dreaming, too. Or they might make her want to dance. She'd settle for either.

She shouldn't have shot the son of a bitch in Missouri after all. Right now the last thing she needed or wanted was administrative leave and nothing to do but sit home and wander around the inside of her brain.

She knocked on the door of 12.

Gail opened it right away. Her wide mouth stretched into the freaky manga smile that was never about how she looked, and she said, rusty with emotion, "Glad you're here, girlfriend." Gail didn't hoard her feelings. When she had them, she gave them away.

She'd cut her hair. Done it herself with the sewing scissors, by the look, and the straight, fine strands lifted and strayed in the static of the furnace-dried air. Two feet of perfect raven gothgirl hair sacrificed to grieving. Hafidha stopped herself before she said *He wouldn't have wanted that*. Because he didn't want anything anymore, did he?

Gail reached out her arms, and Hafidha leaned into the hug. Gail's fragrance--warm, resiny, spicy-sweet--tickled Hafidha's nose just long enough for her to identify it. *Obsidian Widow. That used to be just performance.*

"Thanks for postponing the festivities," Hafidha said.

Gail rewarded her with a little snort of amusement. They *were* festivities, even if the usage was ironic. "Can't have a wake without the chief mourners in attendance, right?"

Gail clutched her hand and pulled her into the tiny entryway, pushed the folding metal closet door open with a chalk-on-blackboard scrape, and produced a blue plastic hanger. Hafidha shrugged off her coat and cobweb-lace scarf and handed them over. The apartment would be crowded. She'd warm up.

"You look good," Hafs said.

Actually, Gail looked...alien. How do you dress for mourning when other people's mourning is just clothes to you? Gail's face was pale and powdered, but her eyes and lips were unpainted, unfinished-looking. The holes in her ears were empty; no marcasite or jet or red rhinestone dangles shivered below her hacked bob. She wore a black burnout velvet tunic Hafidha had found for her; it showed the tattooed ivy twined on Gail's right shoulder and arm, but darkened it like nightfall. The rest of Gail's outfit was a jagged-hem skirt of matte-black rayon, and black ballet slippers.

The slippers, even more than the lack of makeup, made her seem frail. Hafidha wanted to wrap her in Kevlar, carry her off to a safehouse, surround her with a moat and briars, or at least an electric fence.

Not that it would help.

"I thought Chaz would come with you," Gail said over her shoulder as she hung Hafidha's coat.

"He can't make it. He said to tell you he's sorry."

Gail looked down, lips pressed thin, which made Hafidha add, "He would have come if he could. Erik was..." Erik had managed to make friends with Chaz, who never opened up to guys. Hafidha touched her cold fingers to Gail's, and let her hand slide away when Gail looked up. "He *couldn't*, honey."

Hafidha had a pretty good idea why Chaz might need to curl up in his den with his tail over his nose. Not only could she read a calendar, she had one in her head with this week marked "6 months." And Daphne had told her about the cell phone call Chaz got at work. It was okay, because if it wasn't

okay, he would have gritted his little pointy puppy teeth and told everyone about it. So if he didn't want to talk right now, that was his business.

Still, goddamn. She would have liked to have him close by.

Gail nodded and smiled a little. "Tell him I missed him, okay?"

And Gail forgave him. She might even forgive the driver of the car, when Hafidha found him, which she was bound to do. Hafidha Gates, Flying Ace. Gail could forgive people. It was a nice trait. Good for the blood pressure.

"Your trip-- Everybody okay?" Gail asked carefully.

Everybody except the dead guy. "Yeah. Justice triumphs."

Gail knew Hafidha's job involved Elements of Which We Do Not Speak. Erik had, too. When he'd figured it out was when she'd tried to ditch him, because anyone who knew that much about things she didn't tell him was too damned close to her. But Erik didn't ditch easily.

Gail curled her arm around Hafidha's back to draw her out of the entryway, and that, more than the temperature, helped fight off the last of the outdoor chill. "C'mon, I'll get you a drink. You know everybody, right?"

Hafidha did, from parties and clubs and concerts, Gail's clothes swaps and gaming nights, Erik's scavenger hunts and film festivals.

Dov was swaying to the music and saying to Michelle and Jon, in his sweet soft voice, "...jumped over the railing in the dark. Except the dumpster was open."

His audience groaned. Hafidha recognized the story. Jon and Michelle probably did, too, but times like this, well-worn was a comfort. As she watched, Cameron came out of the hall from the back of the apartment and tucked his arm through Dov's.

Amy and Bliss and Emory sat hip-to-hip on the couch, looking at photos on Amy's BlackBerry. Joaquin leaned over the couch arm and Amy's shoulder. Lizzie and Sam stood next to each other by the bookshelves, looking uncomfortable. They'd broken up a few days before Erik died; this was probably the first time they'd seen each other since. Mo ducked out of the kitchen with a bowl of pretzels and handed it around.

Gail's four-top dinner table and chairs were missing from the dining nook next to the kitchen, and the hanging lamp's chain was doubled up on its hook to raise it as high as possible. The oval Ikea coffee table looked lost beneath it, draped in an embroidered red silk shawl. On it, a brass bowl picked up the red in its polished surface, and a circle of glass tea light cups faceted the silk like fake rubies.

Gail pressed a glass of wine into Hafidha's hand. What Hafidha really wanted was something that tasted like fruit punch and contained enough alcohol to melt her head from the inside. But she smiled like a good girl, swallowed a mouthful, and wandered over to stand next to Cameron.

"Hey, sweetie." He wrapped her waist in his other arm, making a daisy chain of her, Cameron, and Dov. "How are you?"

"Great." Hafidha let him wince while she downed the rest of her wine like a shot. She knew how she was supposed to answer, and he knew it wasn't true. So really, why ask?

Because that's what people did with suffering. The customs were meant to smooth things out. Why didn't she want to be smoothed? Was there something wrong with her, or with them? Why didn't everyone in the room want to hit things and scream, "It's not fair!"

Maybe they did, and hid it better than she could. Except she *was* hiding it, wasn't she? And maybe they'd done their screaming and hitting things while she'd been away.

She was out of sync. The case in Missouri had happened in a bubble where time worked differently. She'd come out of the bubble to find that for everyone else, it was a month later, though their calendars agreed with hers. They'd had time to move on.

Effectively true, if not literally. Because hunting gammas took all her attention, and left none for feeling. She might as well have walked away from the funeral five minutes ago.

"Okay, guys. Let's do this." Gail stood in the kitchen archway with a stack of Dixie cups in one hand and a bottle of Knob Creek in the other. Hafidha hated bourbon. Erik had loved it, though.

Gail set the bottle and cups down on the floor. "Lizzie, grab the candle off the bookcase?" She pointed with her chin (round, stubborn--she looked so *soft*), and Lizzie bounded over and brought back the white taper in a black wrought-iron candlestick. Dov, who smoked clove cigarettes outside clubs when he wanted to look moody and European, produced a lighter from the pocket of his vest. Gail nodded. He lit the candle, and Lizzie set it beside the brass bowl.

The group gathered in a ragged arc around the coffee table. The dining nook didn't look empty and off-kilter anymore.

"There's a candle for each of us," Gail said as she took the taper out of the socket and lit the tea light in front of her. She passed it to Mo on her left.

Hafidha stood at Gail's right shoulder, so she watched as each of Erik's attendant friends lit a candle. Melting wax sizzled, and a drop fell on the shawl. Hafidha stole a glance at Gail. A welcome sacrifice to grief, apparently, like the hair. Still, when Hafidha lit her tea light, she spun the candle gently and set it back in the candlestick before wax could spill.

Gail handed the stack of cups to Hafidha. She held them one at a time while Gail poured the Knob Creek. Mo took the results and handed them around the group.

"I'll start, Hafs finishes," Gail announced, back straight, shoulders squared. "We're the goddesses, we get to be the bookends." The little chuckle that went around the circle didn't alter the rising tide of solemnity. Goths, roleplayers, gamers--they could slide into unselfconscious ritual faster than they could swallow.

And how about me? Hafidha asked, looking at the ring of grave faces. *Oh, right. The queen of faking it. They never see me coming.* The aftertaste of the wine was sour in her mouth.

Gail raised her cup. "Erik--" Her voice pinched off, and she blinked. Mo, on her left side, touched Gail's shoulder. Gail swallowed and went on. "Hey, you. I miss you. But even just remembering you makes my life better. Love you always." Her voice wobbled, and a pair of tears snaked toward the corners of her mouth as her lips formed a final word she didn't voice. She held her cup over the bowl and poured out a quick stream, gold-brown, that made the brass ring when it hit. The smell of bourbon reached like tendrils

around the space. Then she knocked back the rest of the liquor, crushed the cup, and tossed it over her shoulder.

And it's just that easy. No, it wasn't. Not for Gail or anyone. Which stage of grieving was anger?

Mo closed the valve in his throat with one finger. When you grew up with kids telling you you talked funny and adults turning to stare if you spoke up, you got into the habit of not saying much. But for Erik, for his friends, Mo would do this. "Erik. If there's a life after this, it better be good. You deserve it." Another stream of bourbon into the bowl, and the rest down Mo's gullet.

Around the circle, loving speeches, gentle regret, so damned civilized. Nobody said, "Erik, you suck for dying. How could you leave me here?" Nobody said, "You were the one who wouldn't leave even when I told him to go. You were supposed to be for always. How did I get suckered into believing it when I knew better?" Hafidha was going to have to cowboy up and do the same, and get over it, and go on.

Maybe, instead of a god, there was a grad student working on a research project. Maybe he came into the lab each morning, peered into the cage, and said, "Hi, little rats. How ya doin'?" And at random intervals he'd take a huge hammer and smash one of the rats to smithereens and observe what the rest of the rats did. Did they notice? Did it bother them? If it changed their behavior, how long before they went back to their regular ratty routine and forgot that at any moment something could drop from the sky and kill them?

An uncomfortable silence around her told her it was her turn. *Ante up, girl. It's not like you never said goodbye before.* She held the reeking cup of bourbon over the bowl. There were no words in her head for her mouth to say.

None of her own, anyway. The Cure song hovered in memory, close at hand, and she found herself murmuring, "...open shadowed eyes on a different world."

Good enough. Splash booze into the bowl, swallow the rest quick, though the thick hot corn-sugar taste would linger.

The silence wasn't uncomfortable anymore. She must have done the right thing.

If she lifted her head, she would look into their solemn faces, a dozen kids playing Funeral. The guy who had tied them together was just meat now. If she looked up, she'd have to see she had nothing in common with them, nothing with anyone. She stared at the spot of congealed wax on the scarf instead, and clutched at the illusion that she wasn't singular and alone.

Gail bent forward and blew out her tea light. Around the circle, the others copied her. Did ritual mean anything? If Hafidha breathed away that little shaky light, did it make Erik disappear for good? Could she keep him, bring him back, just for the time it took the flame to eat up that little cake of wax?

He's dead. Don't let grief make you an idiot. She blew the candle out. And as the last spark blinked out of the wick and the curl of smoke rose, she wanted to scream, *I didn't mean it! I'm sorry!*

She felt Gail's arm snake around her shoulders. "Come on, girlfriend. I made cheesecake."

Everyone was trailing out of the dining nook, a bit giddy with the release of emotion. Everyone but her, and Gail, because Gail was looking after her.

Hafidha shook her head. The words she wanted were still having trouble rising to the top of the pile. "I don't... I don't think I can stay, sweetie. I'm sorry. It's just--I'm not ready yet."

Gail pursed her lips (so pale and unguarded without lipstick), considering whether she ought to argue. Hafidha hoped she wouldn't. Gail could shame her into staying. At last she nodded. "I hear that. Call me tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah. I will. Thanks." She clutched Gail's arm without looking and pulled her close, kissed her cheek (*Obsidian fucking Widow*). Then she slid out of the dining nook, dodged around the edge of the living room, scraped the closet open, snagged her coat and scarf, and slipped out the door.

Even out of the wind, inside her car, it was cold. She started the engine and turned the heater to Scorch, the fan to Gale Force. And clicked on the radio, because she wanted that song out of her head now, please.

But as she headed toward Baltimore Avenue and north and home, Robert Smith got the last word:

She was crying and crying for a girl

Who died so many years before

No chance, Hafidha told him. *Crying's no good to her now.*

She cranked the radio up and lowered the driver's side window. The cold got everyone in the end. Better to go looking for it than live in fear.

"Charlotte Sometimes" by The Cure. Complete lyrics.

Lies

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., December 2008

Stephen Reyes is thinking about lies.

Which means he's thinking about Jessica Kelly and Jessica Kelly's life, as best he and Todd could reconstruct it from her father's lies and her mother's lies and her teachers' and doctors' lies--and her lies, for Jessica Kelly lied (said Todd) like the Angel of the Annunciation.

Reyes wouldn't know. Reyes hasn't exchanged a single word with Jessica Kelly since April 14, 2002, the day he lied to her.

He still has the awful newspaper photograph, the one Todd wasn't fast enough to block: him with his arm around her in a manner that looks either avuncular or predatory, shepherding her toward the car that will take her to Idlewood. She doesn't know that's where she's going; Reyes has promised her, with all the sincerity at his command, that she's going to the private apartment of a U.S. Senator in Washington D.C., a senator who knows about the conspiracy against her, who knows that what she did was only to defend herself, who wants to protect her and to see that the truth becomes public, not the lies told by her enemies.

Jessica Kelly was painfully easy to lie to. Something in her was broken, Reyes thought. Something that even the anomaly couldn't quite harness, although it turned her paranoid schizophrenia and delusions of persecution to excellent use. She believed Reyes--she still believes him in the photograph. You can see it in the look she's giving him, wide-eyed, just a notch or two short of adoring.

Periodically, Reyes wants to burn this photograph. Every time, he stops himself with the knowledge that he'd just have to ask Todd for another copy. And the worse knowledge that Todd wouldn't even ask why. Todd would know.

Todd was the poor bastard who had to deal with her afterward.

Reyes has watched the tapes and seen how good Todd is with her, watched Todd's kindness; his quiet body language; his ridiculous, carefully judged anecdotes; his respectful retreat from anything Jessica doesn't want to talk

about. (Only, of course, to sneak up on it from a different side, because Todd is quite possibly the best interrogator Reyes has ever had the pleasure of watching work.) Todd gets more out of her than Jessica Kelly ever, ever realizes she is giving. But even Todd can't walk through the firestorm unscathed, and Reyes has made meticulous, time-stamped notes of Jessica's triggers, noting in the clinical, distant language of psychiatrists and public servants that the most reliable, and the most provocative, is mention of Reyes' own name.

"She'll kill you with her bare hands if she gets the chance," Todd told him one afternoon, inspecting a raking set of scratches on his right forearm. "She had a go at me."

"I thought we were keeping the subjects restrained at all times," Reyes said disapprovingly.

"We certainly need to keep them better manicured," Todd said. Then he sighed and looked away. "She responds better if she's not in restraints. It lets her build a better fantasy about me."

"Sol," Reyes started.

"It's what she does, Steve," Todd said. "She's a paranoid schizophrenic. She builds delusional systems. If she's *not* restrained when I come to talk to her, I may get to figure in her delusional system as something other than an enemy." He gave Reyes a lopsided grin. "Besides, is it a delusional system if it's true? We *are* conspiring against her."

"Her victims weren't," Reyes had said, unfairly, and used the excuse to stalk out of the room.

Most of the time, in the interviews, Jessica Kelly is lucid, calm--cheerful even--eager to help. She pesters Todd for details about cases he's working on and loves brainstorming ways to defeat the newest monster. As always, the workings of the human mind are strange: she understands that her ability to cause tracheal angioedema simply by wanting it to happen is not natural. She understands that others with similar abilities hurt and murder people and have to be stopped. She even understands that she's in Idlewood in order to stop people being hurt and murdered. And she knows--she absolutely and without qualification *knows*--that she killed five teenage girls by inducing tracheal angioedema. In two cases (two for sure, says

Todd), she stood over her victim and watched her die. But she will not see the identity between herself and the monsters.

Cannot, Todd argues. And part of Reyes wants to agree. She's a paranoid schizophrenic. You can't expect her to have a reliable grip on reality. She was sexually abused by her father from the age of five, maybe four; she had to learn to lie to herself in order to survive. Evidence of that abuse was witnessed by her mother, her doctors, her teachers, and all of them chose to lie to themselves about what that evidence meant. How was Jessica Kelly supposed to learn *not* to tell lies?

But there's another part of Reyes, the part that Falkner, not fondly, calls God the Father, that will not accept these exculpations. He thinks of her victims: Brittany Molson, Laura Czerniak, LaVonda Washington, Judith Renfrew, Stephanie Osgood. All of them fellow members of Jessica's high school cheerleading squad. All of them her friends. Brittany and Judith helped Jessica campaign for student council president the year before. LaVonda was Jessica's "cheersister" (some kind of mentoring program in which older cheerleaders helped new girls--Reyes had to stop the tape twice during the part of the interview in which Jessica brightly and eagerly explained the system, and he suspects his grasp of the finer details suffered). And she murdered them, all five of them, because she believed they hated her, that they talked about her behind her back, that they were plotting to kill her.

He thinks especially of Brittany Molson, who had been Jessica Kelly's best friend since first grade. Jessica hates Brittany now, almost as much as she hates Reyes himself. She says that Brittany was the ringleader of the plot against her, that Brittany envied her. "She hated me," she says to Todd, "and she lied about it. She was such a *bitch*." Jessica says that Brittany flirted with her father--"calling him *Mr. K*," she says with withering scorn. "Makes you want to puke, doesn't it?" Jessica insists that Brittany seduced her father. And lied about that, too.

Howard Kelly denies having slept with Brittany Molson. Of course, Howard Kelly also denies having abused his daughter, so how far does that get you?

Jessica Kelly says she had to kill Brittany. And Laura, Judith, LaVonda, and Stephanie. She says they were going to kill her. She talks endlessly, obsessively about poison and segues from that into talking about her father's

potentially fatal allergy to peanuts, as if there's somehow no difference--and of course, in Jessica's mythology, there isn't. Her father is poison, her father could be poisoned by a moment's inattention, and what are the odds Jessica Kelly didn't daydream about that at least once? Her friends are trying to poison her. "They wanted to watch me choke to death on nothing," she says to Todd again and again. It's the central tenet of her universe. They were going to poison me. I had to poison them first. They hated me. I had to hate them more. They said mean things about me when I couldn't hear them. Now that they're dead, I have to tell you what bitches they were, liars and sneaks and sluts. "You have to know, Mr. Todd," she says earnestly. "You have to know the truth."

And Stephen Reyes sits alone in his office and watches the tapes.

He catches himself sometimes looking for signs that she knows she's lying. For tells. But she doesn't have tells. *She's a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of persecution, Stephen,* he tells himself, *and lying was the first defense mechanism she learned. Truth and lies are the same to her.*

Poisoned with lies, how can she know the taste of them in her mouth?

And he knows that Jessica Kelly's peculiar innocence eats at him not because it offers insight into her pathology or into the workings of the anomaly, but because of his own guilt. If she were a liar, if she told her lies knowing them for what they were, perhaps he could forgive himself for the lies he told her.

Perhaps he could forgive himself for her belief.

Limits

Rockville, MD, January 2009

Daphne Worth lies back on the yielding blue-carpeted floor, her aching forearms spread wide, palms curled upwards, eyes just resting closed. Around her, a vast space echoes with cheery voices. She breathes deep, filling her lungs with the scent of sweaty suede and magnesium chalk.

Her ears ring with the rattle of carabiners, with shouted questions and commands, with banter: "I bet I can onsight that stepladder." "Hey, I didn't order a traverse!" "So don't fall off!"

The voices of friends and acquaintances bounce against the fiberglass walls, the vaulted ceiling. Ten feet away, Tasha McAndrews says to somebody, "Sure, but climbing on plastic still isn't the same as climbing on rock," and whatever that somebody answers, it's buried under one of the Steves calling, "Hey, Stan, bring me the wrench? The little one?"

Bushy's complaining that he's starving, and Daphne hears Chaz answer with a snort. "Starving takes a long time," he says. "Go buy a Clif bar. Support the climbing gym economy."

Bushy grumbles-mumbles something as Daphne tries to find the energy to pull her hands into her chest. It's rude to take up too much floor. She lifts her hands and shakes the arms out, trying to get the blood moving again, mellow on an endorphin rush. It's all sweet and good.

She opens her eyelids when a shadow dims the glow through them. She hasn't felt him sit down beside her, but Chaz is there, arms folded over his knees. He looks away quickly when her eyes find him. He stares up at the wall. "You want to climb something?"

"God, no." She sits up. "I might be fit to belay in another five minutes. That overhang is six kinds of bitch."

He nods, but she knows he doesn't understand, not viscerally. His strength-to-weight ratio is in another league. *Monstrous.* She'd never think that loud enough to have to admit she knows it. Even now, even after Texas and helplessness and seven months of healing, he doesn't *get* human limits, though he's tolerant of them. Gracious, even. The way a young demigod

should be. But the understanding is intellectual--he's been pushed to his limit, sure. But it's a limit a baseline never would have reached, because a baseline would have been long dead by then.

She'd envy it, but she knows better. There's nothing about the price he pays to be him that she should envy.

He's still carefully avoiding eye contact. She wants to tell him she owes him, that she never thought this would be a part of her life or that she'd grow to love it. She certainly never could have guessed that climbing would become a passion, or that a big part of that passion would be the time spent with Chaz. She wants to tell him that it's his fault her life is *good*. Not just tolerable, balanced, livable. *Good.*

But that would be cruel, when he still has that hollow look inside his eyes, like the light doesn't reach there. When he's still coming back from the edge.

When he still almost remembers what it's like to be frail and fragile.

"I want to try the black 5.12 again," he says. "Think you can stand me dogging if I fall on you a bunch?"

She draws her feet under her and reaches for her ATC. "I'm there for you," she says. "Fall away."

Dragons

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington DC, February 2009

Late at night, when the kids have gone off to their husbands and their wives and their lovers and their empty beds, to their assignations and their concerts and their youthful heartbreaks, Stephen Reyes sits in his office and watches the tapes.

The tapes he watches today are from Daniel Brady's latest of many interviews with Joseph Lawrence Hakes. *Bloody Larry*, the Idlewood staff calls him. Daphne Worth, an exemplary judge of character if Reyes has ever met one, called him a *fucking human Ebola virus.*

Brady: *So you have no recollection of any personally distressing incidents preliminary to the events of May, 1999?*
Hakes: *Are you looking for a mitigating circumstance, Agent Brady? Because there... aren't any.*

Stephen Reyes chews his lower lip and stares at the monitor. Stephen Reyes doesn't feel bad about keeping this one in a cage.

Joseph Lawrence Hakes. His mother called him *Joe*, until he killed her. Possibly while he was killing her. Hakes would be the first to say so, if he thought it would bug the interviewer.

He even has a serial killer name, two trochees and a downbeat.

Brady: *No, Joe. I'm looking for patterns. You know that. And you know what you get for cooperating.*
Hakes: *Sure. I get a fucking library card.*

Books. He gets books, whatever he wants, within the limits of the system's ability to provide. Something to take the edge off his endless, empty, isolated days, because Hakes lives like an anchorite immured in stone. He never sees a face. He never hears a voice that's not mediated by electronics. He's never touched by human hands, because all Hakes needs in order to kill is line of sight, and Hakes *likes* to kill.

In him, as in Jason Saito, Clemson McCain, Frank Scott--William Villette--the anomaly found an enthusiastic partner.

The funny thing is he only likes to read nonfiction. Biographies, popular history, social science. He likes books about disease and its effect on civilization--*Guns, Germs, and Steel. Yellow Fever, Black Goddess*--but then he might be playing to type. Or it might be a hint about his mythology.

Brady: *Do you remember the first time you got really sick, Joe?*
Hakes: *Sure. I remember the first time I was in the hospital. I was eight. I got a kidney infection and it nearly killed me. I had a fever of a hundred and four. When the old bitch finally took me to the hospital, I puked all over the E.R. nurse.*

Joseph Lawrence Hakes was a sickly child. He's healthy as a horse, these days. His chronic illnesses--asthma, eczema, abcesses, a peanut allergy--all spontaneously resolved when he started murdering the people who annoyed him. Or, more precisely (Reyes wants to look away from the video, but he doesn't let himself) when Hakes killed the single parent who jabbed him with feces-smeared needles to cause his abscesses, who fed him purgatives to induce diarrhea and vomiting.

It's called Munchausen Syndrome, in which an individual seeks to feed a craving for attention and emotional support by faking illness. In Hakes's mother's case, it was expressed by proxy: she inflicted the illnesses on her child.

Brady: *What happened after that?*
Hakes: *After I puked on the nurse? They put me on an IV. Antibiotics. They wouldn't let me have a drink of water for two days.*

His throat works, remembering thirst. The IV can keep you hydrated, but Reyes knows it does nothing for the dry scratch in your throat, the maddening animal desire.

Hakes: *Some volunteer kept coming in and reading me stupid stories.*

Stephen Reyes doodles on his pad. He's writing the word *Sociopath* for the second time when a tap on the doorframe heralds the frowning face of Solomon Todd. Todd cranes his neck to see what's on the monitor, and frowns the more. "He's not going to say anything new, you know."

"He had a hell of a childhood."

Todd's mouth works. "I probably would have killed the old dragon too, in his shoes. That doesn't make any difference to his innocent victims, does it?"

Brady: *What did your mother say after that? Did she come to visit you?*
Hakes: *She lived at the fucking hospital, man. What do you think? She slept on the couch in the room. And when the nurses weren't there, she told me I made her sick.*

Hakes's slow digitized smile is a rictus that seems to involve too many teeth, as if Rob Liefeld were drawing the panel. *I guess I showed her,* the smile says. He doesn't even need to shape the words for Reyes to hear them.

Reyes clicks the pause control. "He'd laugh at you if he heard you call his mother a dragon. No use for story books. Doesn't see the point of them. So what's that other than good old-fashioned sociopathy?"

Todd rolls his eyes. "The question is the answer. See, the people who write picture books have it wrong, because they're mostly not psychologists or anthropologists."

It's a Toddlike segue, all right--the apparent non sequitur that Reyes knows will turn out to follow on perfectly. "Picture books?"

"A baby dragon is still a dragon, Steve." Todd peers at Reyes through his bifocals, looking for comprehension.

Reyes shakes his head.

"Dragons," Todd says. "Storytellers like to pretend that dragons would listen to our drivel, but you know what? The fact is, dragons don't have the hardware or the software to care. They don't have empathy, or mirror neurons, or any protocols for modeling or identifying character growth or emotions. Narrative just doesn't work on a monster, because the monster doesn't give a shit."

Reyes studies Todd's face for a moment, then transfers his inspection to the frozen image of Joseph Lawrence Hakes. "I'm a snake, bitch," he mutters. "What did you expect?"

"Precisely," Todd says, brightly, laying a finger aside his nose like Saint Nick about to vanish up a chimney. "Sometimes, kemo sabe, the dragon is

just a dragon. Now go home. Bloody Larry will still be there in the morning, and if you leave now, you can make it in time for *The Daily Show*. I'm following my own advice. See you tomorrow."

Making good on his promise, he evaporates, leaving Reyes to frown alternately at his monitor and his wall clock.

"I don't believe in dragons," Reyes says. He palms his cold cup of tea and pushes play.

Fanmail

Washington, D.C., March 2009

Solomon Todd does not read his own fanmail.

Oh yes, he still gets some; as long as there'll be colleges there'll be disaffected college students, the kind with long hair and vintage Che Guevara tees or the type of beard that just begs for the gentle, godly touch of a pair of old-style clippers, and as long as there are college students he'll still see that compact royalty cheque for *Life By Misadventure* every six months. It's in its thirteenth printing. They slowed down some once the internet came out, but Todd doesn't mind. He was never really in the thing for the money.

He pays a perennially out-of-work philosophy major with long, swinging Scando-dreads to take it in like laundry. Geraldine tosses all the panties and saves the nudie pictures, autograph requests, and anything being offered for the low, low cost of free. Anything truly weird goes as tithe to his liege lord Stephen Reyes, to live in photocopy eternal in the collection of blurry alien autopsy pictures, first-person accounts of the secret war in Heaven starring Tom Hanks, and missives all in capitals fingering neighbours and other local annoyances as government agents or rogue bodysnatchers, all admirable as examples of subjectivity in journalism. The letters from jailbird bikers, once lush and plentiful, are quietly disappeared before he ever sees them. Conflict of interest's a bitch.

The unsinkable Salome Todd, *soeur*, used to do it *gratis*, back in the days when he didn't have his own regular address. It was the kind of thing that gave her a laugh until the first really detailed piece of hate mail came in and he had to talk her out of getting a second shotgun. Now he pays someone, and meets at a prearranged rendezvous in Adams Morgan for the handover every first Sunday of the month. They're reasonably surreptitious; you hand me the briefcase--or in this case, the beat-up canvas tote bag--and I slide you the manila envelope with ten crisp unmarked bills.

Sometimes, he buys Ger a coffee.

Today is one such day: blustery March cool, with the rain blowing against the windowpanes of Geraldine's local, a trendy converted-house coffeeshop

of the subtype that always feels to Todd like the coffeehouses of the sixties run through the photocopier a few too many times. None of the mugs match and the floors are creaking wood. Both the outdoor and indoor signage--*CounterCulture* in bright blue-and-green letters--are handpainted.

"Got an interesting one," Ger says over chipped blue nailpolish and a latte bowl painted up with an impressionist rendering of the Stonewall Inn. It's amazing, the things that become souvenir fodder. "I held it back for you."

She removes it from her coat pocket. The envelope's slit open at the top, white and wrinkled. "Hans Gruber," he guesses, taking it from her hand.

"Nah. I didn't read past the first paragraph." And that raises Todd's eyebrows, because Geraldine is usually ruthless in her efficient triage, assignation, and absorption of other people's business. "It seemed, well. Private."

Curiouser and curiouser.

Solomon Todd opens the letter right there. Anything else is asking for a dance with a logging truck on the way home, the kind where they find the incriminating letter right next to the dirty underwear and your dead body never lives it down.

Mr. Todd, it says. It's handwritten. You can tell an awful lot about a person by their handwriting; it's Todd's policy to always type. This person, from their--*her*, he corrects, after glancing to the end--blue-ballpoint penmanship, is young enough, smart enough, and horrifically nervous.

You don't know me, it starts. Many of Todd's letters start that way. But very few of them continue: *My dad was Wally Pasqualero. You'd have known him as Fresno.*

Fresno wore a black leather jacket and beard in the summertime in 1976, but everyone did. He babied his cobbled-together Harley and was bluff and quiet where other people were bluff and loud. He could make a chili verde that would burn your testicles off with only one cast-iron skillet and a spare chassis rod for a spoon, cooking over a cooling Caddy engine block in the middle of the high Nevada desert at midnight. He was a one-percenter to the bone--and a terribly inaccurate label that was, but even inaccurate labels could get reclaimed by the people on the other side of the sticker--but you'd

not know it for sure at first, looking at him. And Fresno, thinly disguised in the way that journalism about the Hells Angels required, was a central character of *Life By Misadventure*.

"So, Hans got your wife?" Ger asks. Her organic, fair trade, soy milk, half-sweet latte's empty. Todd has perhaps been staring.

"And my kid, and my plane, and some teenage hackers and my fish," he replies.

Geraldine offers him a terrorist fist-bump, which he doesn't rise to. She knocks it gently on his balding head instead and tucks her filthy lucre down her bodice. "See you next month," she says, and sashays out the door in a cloud of solvency.

He dumps the envelope onto the table.

There are pictures inside. Family birthdays, poses with that Harley, grinning summertime porch shots with the bottle of Bud only half-hidden behind a scuffed black leather boot. Fresno looks bizarrely old, though the grin's the same. People do get old; Todd knows that, intellectually. Even when you're not looking. He looks at them carefully before he reads from the letter again.

My dad died this year, it says. *It was a heart attack; we kind of knew it was coming, and he went in his sleep. I found your book with his things.*

I didn't know most of those things about him.

So since you told me the beginning, I figure it's fair I tell you the rest.

Fresno got married to a girl he picked up working security at an obscure concert in Dayton, Ohio. The band didn't last the year, but Fresno and his girl (pictured in a brown and orange floral dress and too much mascara, holding his hand) bought a pastel blue house with aluminum siding, settled down, got jobs. Had some kids. He stopped being Fresno for a while. He started being Wally.

It didn't last. There was a mortgage, so there were runs with his old buddies. And there was jail time, once or twice or three times, and long stretches of silence in the pastel blue house that lingered for months after he came

home. There were drugs. He kicked the drugs. He got into NA. His wife left anyway. He sent his son and daughter to college.

They came home to hold his hand when the illness that took the brass knuckles to his heart showed up, and didn't leave until it finished the job six months later and they buried him. He died, peaceful, in his bed.

That is the end of the story.

There are a lot of stories Solomon Todd can't tell, and a lot of things he can't say but in stories. That can be crippling. Working with the ACTF, and the BAU before it, drove home the knowledge that there are some things that don't have a beginning, middle, and end; most things, in fact. It's only sheer luck or providence that ever lets you turn the last page on something, close the cover and put it down clean. The rest is wondering, and learning to put things away; forgetting all the things you knew. That's the trick of subjective journalism; pretending the story is over when the lens turns away.

He keeps the letter in his pocket on the drive home, separate from the rest of his fanmail like the Hope Diamond plucked out of a fountain's worth of tarnished, soggy pennies. He slings the bag next to the fishtank when he gets in, forgotten, and goes to his writing desk.

There's a return address. You get that even less often than the whole story.

Thank you, he writes her on a fresh sheet of lined paper, the only kind he's ever bothered using, with his semi-retired fountain pen. Above his desk, on the bookshelf, Fresno's grinning young face stares at him out of the one photograph he had; a clutch of young men in worn denim straddling their bikes, shadows cast onto a pitted California highway, and Solomon Todd, hands in his pockets, beside them. *For telling me the end.*

Powers

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., March 2009

"Lau would be the Toxic Avenger," Hafs says, feet kicked up on her desk and her braids swinging like pendulums as her head lolls--or lols--over the back of her Aeron. "Can't you just see her shoving some dipshit's head under the fryolater?"

"Only if they richly deserved it," Daphne answers. Her knees drape over the arm of the sunflower velvet couch. "See, that's the problem with gammas. No Hollywood justice. It's never some fool who *richly deserves* to suffer." Daphne kicks her feet, heels drumming against stretched fabric. "I'd go after people who don't pull over for emergency vehicles. My gamma power would involve making them spend a subjective eternity in an ambulance stuck in traffic while their mother can't breathe."

"Hah!"

If Daphne were a cat, she'd be batting at those beads swinging on Hafidha's braids. She tucks her hands behind her head to encourage a little self-control.

Hafidha continues, "Mom would set people on fire with a look. Oh, wait, she does that now. No, I think her gamma power would involve The Voice of Command. She'd just order you to jump off a bridge and halfway to the water you'd start to wonder if you should have asked why."

Daphne kicks harder. "Frost would become a human carcinogen. We'd never catch her, because her victims would die six months later, counties away. Seizing and bleeding out the nose. Actually, I'm not sure she's *not* doing that."

Hafidha's screen is covered with flickering windows of color, appearing and dismissed too fast for Daphne to follow. She reaches for a brownie off the plate beside the printer and says, "Maybe we should look into it."

Maybe we should. "Duke."

"Teleportation," Hafs answers promptly. "But only to the most unlikely place possible. No, gamma!Duke would never get caught, because nobody

would believe he did any such thing, even when he was confessing. His power would be the unsuspension of disbelief. El Jefe."

"Telepathy." Daphne says so without thinking. A sharp frown follows. "Crap. No. *He* does *that* now."

"Gamma!Dad would have a plan," Hafs says. Her hands flick out to both sides to indicate the exclamation mark, though nothing interrupts the scroll of data before her. "Hell, his mythology might *revolve* around having a plan. Maybe A Plan could be his manifestation."

Daphne sits up and swings her feet to the floor. Suddenly, she doesn't want to think about Stephen Reyes, gamma. Not now, and maybe not ever. "Hey," she says. "Let's talk about something else now."

Hafidha glances over her shoulder, lips forming a cushiony O. "Your point," she says. "I see it. How's that kitchen reno coming?"

shadow unit

2.06 "Cuckoo" - by Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear, & Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

January 2009, Highway 301, Potomac River

In the shadows below the Governor Harry Nice Memorial Bridge, a small figure in an aluminum rowboat poled up to a bridge piling. The thin, strong arms that worked the pole showed bare below t-shirt sleeves, pale as the underside of a snake in the light off the cloud cover. A particularly forceful jab-and-push bounced mouse-brown hair off a pallid face; eyeglass lenses reflected for an instant before the hair shuttered them again.

A bundle filled the bottom of the boat end to end, humped over the benches, leaving just enough room for the person with the pole to sit. It was wrapped untidily in what might once have been someone's living room drapes; the dim light showed hints of stripes and flowers where the bundle rose above the rowboat's flanks.

The figure leaned out of the boat to grab a twisted stalk of rebar left poking out of the concrete by some past repair and loop the painter clumsily around it. The current swept the boat around, three o'clock to six o'clock, pointing its stern downriver.

Large as the bundle was, it seemed no work at all for the person in the boat to get those skinny arms under it and lift. It rolled onto the gunwale, and the boat tipped steeply toward the rushing water. Whatever its contents, the bundle wasn't light.

There was no splash when it hit the water, not with such a short distance to drop. For a moment the fabric bloused, catching air on the river's surface. Then it disappeared into the clouded Potomac.

The figure clambered over the prow of the rocking boat onto the bridge piling, untied the painter, and--one-handed against the current--pulled the

boat in close. Bare fingers wedged under one of the boat's aluminum ribs and pulled. The rib tore upward with a screech and pop of rivets. The same fingers pried apart the sheet metal seam underneath.

Water pushed shining and dark up through the split. The figure let go of the painter. The rowboat was already sinking as the current whirled it away.

The figure plunged into the river and swam awkwardly, swiftly, across the current toward the nearer shore. Close to the bank the swimmer found the silted, shifting bottom underfoot and rose, just as a half moon broke the cloud cover. It showed a woman emerging from the river--scrawny under the soaked and clinging t-shirt and water-dark jeans.

She stalked out onto the beach, high-stepping like a heron, the narrow margin of ice crunching under her canvas high-tops. On level ground she plucked the glasses off her nose and shook herself like a dog. Water showered from her hair. If she felt the cold, she didn't show it.

She walked a quarter mile through coarse brush and trees to a white panel van parked on the dirt access road. As she unlocked the driver's door she hummed softly; the tune came and went, uncertain in the meandering notes. Careless of the faded upholstery and her wet clothes, she climbed in and shut the door.

On the passenger's seat beside her lay a scuffed blue spiral notebook labeled "197" in heavy black marker, and a fine-point gel pen. She propped the notebook on the steering wheel, flipped to a half-filled page, and began to write in the faint light off the clouds. Her movements were quick, sharp, graceless and efficient as a typewriter smacking metal against its platten. The pen pressed hard on the paper, nearly through it, though her face was calm. She continued to hum as she wrote, softer and with less tune.

The notebook was college-ruled; she fitted two lines of tiny, spiky handwriting between each blue line, ignoring the printed margins and writing from the wire spiral to the paper's edge.

At the bottom of the page she finished the line with a flourish, and the point dug a hole in the sheet. She slapped the notebook closed.

The passenger footwell held an open-topped cardboard box of fat manila envelopes. Their top edges were labeled, illegible in the shadow under the

dash. She pulled out the first one, folded up the metal clasp to open it, and dumped the contents on the passenger seat.

A photocopy of an *Albuquerque Journal* article from 2002: "Suspect arrested in high-rise bombing," with a photo of a handcuffed man between two FBI agents: a sturdy, graying-blond, smiling white man and a smaller black man whose grave expression looked comfortable on his face.

A printout of a *Maxwell's Grove Online* article from 2007: "MG's Old Dogs win league," with a photo of fit, sixtyish men in softball uniforms. The one on the far left was the smiling man from the newspaper photo.

College transcripts. Pages from a phone bill. A two-gig thumb drive. Photos of the smiling man--surveillance photos, showing him unaware, unalarmed. In several he was with a red-headed woman in her late fifties, well-dressed, also smiling, usually at him.

A half-dozen credit cards. A New Jersey driver's license, the photo emphasizing the man's square face and the gray in his hair.

The driver smoothed her thumb over the smiling face in the photo, as if petting it. Her eyes narrowed, and her humming rose in volume.

She stacked the collection of documents and added the spiral notebook. Then she slid everything into the manila envelope. The label at the top edge was incomplete; a name, and "1952 --." With her gel pen, the driver filled in "2009" after the dash and tucked the envelope into the cardboard box in the footwell.

There were over two dozen envelopes in the box.

*

Twilight sloped down the streets of the Federal District. Quitting time for the U.S. Government. Pedestrians bustled like ants for the nearest Metro stop. Cars queued like cattle in a loading chute, leaving parking garages. Limos double-parked or waited at red curbs or intimidated lesser vehicles to press into traffic bound for the on-ramps. Commercial trucks and vans brought work to the night shift, or slipped a delivery into a mail room just under the next-day wire.

No one would notice another white van.

The woman had to stretch her spine to look into the viewscreen of the camera braced on the steering wheel. Its long lens watched the entrance of a parking garage reserved for federal employees. The woman and the camera were equally, inhumanly patient.

In the passenger seat lay a new spiral notebook, "198" printed thick and precise on the clean cover.

At the sight of a black 2007 Cadillac CTS-V passing the rising gate, the woman stiffened and drew a quick breath through her teeth. The car paused for foot traffic on the sidewalk, and she focused and clicked. She kept clicking as the car turned right toward the van, passed it, turned left at the end of the block.

Her focused stillness was gone. She pushed the camera into the passenger's seat and snatched up the notebook, flipped three pages in to the first blank sheet. She wrote; like automatic writing, the gel pen travelled hastily, ceaselessly, across the page, two lines of writing for each ruled space. It was as if a library of information was stored in the woman's brain, moved into ink on paper at a desperate speed. As if outrunning fire or flood or some other menace that ate knowledge.

She hummed some fast, unrecognizable song. There was no emphasis to mark the beginnings or ends of measures.

*

Outside the kitchen it was dark. Inside there was no day or night, only the hundred-watt bulb in the ceiling fixture and the cut-up army surplus blankets stapled tight across the window over the sink and the panes in the back door.

The formica-and-steel-tubing kitchen table was once a place to prepare meals and eat them. The small woman ate standing up at the counter, straight from the saucepan, though the canned ravioli were hot enough to burn. Then she turned to the table, with its photo printer and the cardboard box stuffed with folders.

She pushed the camera's memory chip into the slot in the printer and jabbed buttons. The printer clunked and whined pages out, like a girl in a fairy tale who spat toads when she spoke. The room smelled of canned tomato sauce and waterproof ink.

When the printer subsided, the woman pulled the sheets off its tongue, sat down in the single chair, and fanned the photos on the table top.

Sometimes the glare off the Cadillac's windshield hid the driver's face. But most of the shots were clear. The person behind the wheel was the grave-faced dark-skinned man from the newspaper photo of the FBI agents. His hands rested at ten and two o'clock, and his collar and tie were still precise even when he thought no one could see him.

The woman smoothed her thumb across the imaged face, as if she could feel the shape of it. Her lips moved, turning her humming into words hung on the ruins of a tune and a scrambled rhythm: "...air you breathe, food you eat, friends you greet in the--"

Her mouth snapped closed. She sat motionless, silent, as if waiting for an answer, or listening to one. After a deep breath that might have been relief, she began to hum again. She yanked the first envelope out of the box, squared the printed photos' edges on the table, and slid them in.

With her gel pen she wrote across the top of the envelope, "Reyes, Stephen S. 1958 -- "

Act II

"There's no one here to witness and appreciate your diligence."

The voice startled Stephen Reyes, dragged his eyes away from the view of the building across the street.

Esther Falkner stood in the door of his office in a blue pullover sweater and jeans, a slightly lumpy crocheted scarf draping her neck, a quilted coat he didn't recognize hanging from one finger over her shoulder. Her dark hair was pulled back above her temples, but otherwise lay loose down her back.

Mr. Hoover would not approve. Good.

"You realize that, don't you?" she added.

He considered a moment before he said, "*You're* here."

It got a one-cornered smile out of her. Lately he rejoiced every time he caused someone to do anything other than frown or look blank.

"All right." She shrugged the shoulder under the coat. "I bear witness."

"And approve?"

"That depends on why you're here. If it's just showing off..."

"For whom? There's no one here."

That earned him a larger smile, and a nod that substituted for a laugh, and a general unbending that encouraged him to say, "Come in. Sit. What are you doing in the office on the Sabbath?"

"Bekk's spending the weekend with her cousins--learning to ski, and I hope, not learning to break any bones. To preempt sulking, Ben took Deb on a day's worth of father-daughter bonding."

"Which explains where *they* are." Reyes tried hard to look expectant but not satirical.

The satire was all in Falkner's voice. "I suppose I could have gone for a facial and a pedicure."

She would, but only if he ordered her to. Falkner lived by duty, and the duties she observed most faithfully were to her family and her work. She knew as well as Reyes, so there was no point in saying it aloud, that she had a duty to herself as well. She only acknowledged that one if ignoring it threatened to interfere with the other two. Reyes doubted the philosophy, but Falkner's application of it had always been effective.

So he leaned back in his chair, pressed his fingertips together (and thought, *My Magneto pose*, but it was too late to change it), and told her, "Nonni Peretti called me this morning at home."

Falkner's head pulled back, and she frowned. She also tossed her coat on the hook by the door and sat in the chair on the other side of the desk. "I haven't heard from Nonni since... I thought she didn't like you?"

"No one likes me, remember?" He smiled, to tell her she didn't need to respond one way or the other to that. "It took a bit of chitchat before she nerved herself to ask if I'd seen Larry."

"*What?*" The furrows between Falkner's brows were as deep as he'd ever seen them.

"He goes to the gym every Wednesday. Wednesday before last, he kissed her goodbye--I assume, knowing Larry--and went out the door with his gym bag. Nonni was away all day working the Red Cross blood drive. When she came home, he wasn't there. No notes, no message on the machine, no sign he'd ever come back."

"A week and a half. She's just now asking?"

"As soon as the police would take one, she filed a missing persons report."

Falkner's mouth twisted, as if she'd found something sour on her tongue. "Priorities," she pronounced, infinitely dry.

"It happens. A husband or wife goes out to fetch the Sunday paper, a quart of milk, to move the car around the block, and just...never comes home."

"And knowing Larry...?"

Reyes wanted to say that anything was possible, that we never really know the people we work with, that people change. Those things were true, but right now he hated every one of them, and didn't want to give them voice. "Larry, that infinite source of sexist jokes and just-us-guys bullshit, loves Nonni to distraction. If she predeceases him, he'll wither away in a week from sheer lack of will to live."

Falkner breathed in and sighed. "You sound certain. I thought a good scientist hedged his bets more than that."

"I'm tired of science. And damned tired of not being certain."

The little turn of her head made him play the words back. For someone else, they were nothing special, but for Stephen Reyes, Man of god-damned Bronze, they were practically raving.

We can't control anything but ourselves.

"What did you tell her?"

"That I'd invent a reason to put it in the Bureau's jurisdiction, if I had to. What did you think I'd tell her?"

"It's not ours. It's not even Down the Hall's, unless a behavioral pattern turns up."

It would be easier not to say it, not to share what he'd been thinking. Especially since almost certainly nothing would come of it, and no harm would fall on anyone because he failed to speak up.

In fact, all his instincts said, *Don't share.* But his instincts were demonstrably flawed.

"Esther. A former FBI special agent disappears. And not just any agent--a former member of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. We are the people who go where the weird shit is. We have good reason to say we don't believe in coincidence."

He watched what little her face gave away while she thought it over. At last she said, "Do you mind if I hope this time it is one?"

"Not a bit. I'd like the company."

She rose from the chair. She did it more easily these days. He hadn't realized how much watching her pain hurt him until he didn't have to.

"You didn't say--what *did* bring you in on a Saturday?"

Falkner snorted and shook her head. "They found another body in Chillicothe."

Reyes could almost smell rot in his indrawn breath. "That's eight, then."

Falkner nodded. "I wanted to call Browning, see if we could help with anything."

But she wouldn't call from her home phone. She fenced the monsters out of her house as much as she could. It was an act of ritual cleanliness, like keeping kosher. "What did he say?"

"He'll call us if something turns up. I think it helped to know we're here."

Esther Falkner, crime-fighting mom. Her caretaking instinct extended to cover her family, her team, and the lead detectives of cases they'd closed months ago. He wanted to tease her about it, and once he would have. Now he'd rather not presume. He didn't want to see the professional shutters go up on her face.

"And you came in on a Saturday," Falkner continued, detached as a lecturer in a level-100 class, "because you're worried about a man who said 'No

offense' to you at least three times a week the entire time you worked with him."

Reyes raised his eyebrows. "He really didn't mean any offense, you know."

"And because you feel sorry for a woman who's been barely polite to you for ten years."

"Some days you just feel sorry for everybody."

"Maybe those are the days you should stay home."

Reyes smiled tightly. "It's the days you don't give a damn about anybody you should stay home."

When she hesitated, he realized what she was wondering, so he said, "I'm not interrupting anything in the off-duty life that I work hard to keep the kids from believing I have."

"Actually, the kids think you have four girlfriends and swap off every forty-eight hours."

"I wonder what sort of vitamins they think I'm taking." He shook his head and moved folders from one pile to another. *Working. See? I should get back to it.* "I'm girlfriendless for the weekend."

The silence lasted, and he knew what response that was supposed to elicit, but he responded anyway. He looked up, so she could judge his face when she asked, "And if you weren't, you wouldn't have come in?"

"Remind me again why everyone likes you? We're not *that* different."

"Sure, we are. *I'm* leaving." For emphasis, she plucked her coat off the hook. "I might even stop at the mall on the way home and buy a pretzel."

"I'll go, I'll go. As soon as I read these reports."

"Stephen." She came back to his desk in three long strides and leaned forward, palms braced on the front edge. Intimidation: only one of the top-of-the-line items in Esther Falkner's toolkit. "If anyone else on the team said that, what would you tell them?"

Reyes sighed and leaned back further in his chair. "I hate shopping mall pretzels." Villette used to bring in fresh ones, homemade. He missed them. *And that's another thing you probably shouldn't say.*

"Stephen."

"*However*. I haven't finished the latest Walter Mosley novel, there's a recipe for adobo sauce I've been meaning to try, and I haven't checked anything off my list of god-damned feel-good rental movies since August."

Falkner released her claim on his desk. "Very good."

"Thank you."

"Go home, Stephen."

He dropped the last folders on the pile, tidied the edges, and stood.

I'm trying, he wanted to say. *I don't know if I'm trying the right things, or if they're doing any good. I'm the last person they'll give that feedback to. And I don't blame them.*

Her family, her team; the responsibilities lay nearly visible on Falkner's shoulders. He wasn't going to hang his troubles there, too. He'd go talk to Kay, but she'd raise one lovely arched eyebrow and say, "Exes are still family. Remember our little talk about ethics?"

"I promise to stay out of the office until Monday if you do the same," he said instead. He locked his office door behind them.

"Scout's honor." She gave the salute as if she didn't have to think about it first.

They took the elevator together in silence, because it was a fast elevator and they weren't the sort of people who needed to fill the empty spaces. Falkner logged out first. When he stepped up to the desk, she turned, head canted and smile crooked.

"And if you spend all your time at home thinking about work, it's cheating."

He puffed breath out his nose. "Do we not believe in cheating, now, either?"

"That depends," said Falkner, "on who you're cheating."

*

Reyes had lived his whole life as a thoroughly urban creature, but he'd never been conscious of it until he settled in Washington, DC. As a kid in Chicago, and later as a student, he'd ridden buses and the El, gone to the Field Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry, concerts at McCormick

Place, ballgames at Wrigley Field, or the zoo or Grant Park or Lake Michigan. He'd bought things from stores that fronted on streets. He'd had neighbors down the hall rather than down the block.

But it seemed when most government employees in the District went home, they went to the suburbs. The expectation was that as you moved up in pay grade, you moved outside the Beltway, got yourself a stretch of lawn and a driveway and a house that purported to mimic French or English or Italian or Spanish architecture and was unmistakably North American Suburban.

Reyes's self-image had never included mowing the grass. It also didn't include hiring people to sweat in his front yard. He'd bought a condo in Dupont Circle. It had a wealth of tall, narrow windows, skylights, and exposed brick walls: a city dwelling inside and out.

For all the time he spent in it, it could as well have been a tract house out past Rockville.

This afternoon he could address some of that deficit. He could put on sweat pants and a Cubs t-shirt, park himself in the black leather recliner with his copy of *Blonde Faith* and a Negra Modelo, and listen to Juliette Greco sing about resignation. He could relax.

He could try, at least.

He hadn't exactly lied to Falkner. He *was* girlfriendless for the weekend. Delphine was in New York, hanging a show, and it wasn't like they had an exactly formal arrangement. He didn't expect her to call.

So he wasn't cheating anyone but himself.

Larry Peretti wasn't, objectively, a big man; he was bigger than Reyes, but that could be said of almost everyone Reyes had worked with. But his personality entered the room first and left last. He liked to talk to people, and they liked to talk to him. The only better public liaison in the Bureau was Nicolette Lau.

Peretti had an adaptable mind, or Reyes would never have recruited him into the WTF. He'd had a lot to adapt to. The idea of the anomaly, of course--but Peretti had joined up Down the Hall when it was still the Behavioral Science Unit and located elsewhere--even before the legendary John Douglas

changed the name to Investigative Support Unit and split off a practical team from teaching duties.

Monsters had been Peretti's day job for years. The new part was working under a black man and a Jewish woman. The closest thing Shadow Unit had to Peretti's idea of an FBI agent at the time was Solomon Todd, sometimes referred to by agents in other units as That Damned Hippy.

Peretti got the hang of it, though. Until the day he took early retirement, he was still telling jokes that annoyed Falkner. That could have griped the Stephen Reyes who had spent a good part of his time in a Philadelphia field office in the eighties picking dried black beans out of his computer keyboard and proving he was a better agent than the ones who whispered behind their hands about affirmative action and raised their eyebrows over how *articulate* a black man could be.

The Stephen Reyes who was AIC of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force, who had built it with his own sweat and hand-picked Peretti to work under him, chose to understand the distinction Peretti made: the black men in his jokes were archetypes, and his boss was a real human being. As long as it wasn't the other way around, Reyes also chose not to take offense.

Besides, he'd heard Larry, the Italian, talk about the damned Swedes.

A case on Long Island was the last for Peretti. Reyes had sat by him in his hospital bed. (*And that's something I'd like to not have to do anymore, thank you.*) Peretti, still hoarse, had whispered, "My goddamn lungs full of water, everything going black, and all I could think was, 'Nonni'll be so mad.' She tells me she knew marrying me was dangerous when she did it, and I believe her. But I realized *I* can't do it, Steve. I can't leave her to get on alone."

Reyes had felt a little spike of jealousy at that. What was it like to love someone so much that you'd stay alive, not for you, but for them? That you'd change the destination of your life in order to get off at the same station?

He'd loved, but not like that. If it was something one could learn, he hadn't learned it yet. He'd barely started on becoming a decent human being, for godsake.

You didn't expect recognition for behaving like a decent human being. Operating at the baseline didn't get anyone champagne and cake and a day off. He did wonder, though, when he would reach the marker and how he'd

know. He understood so much about the mental workings of his species, but his own behavior was harder to analyze.

Not that he could pitch a no-hitter every time. Villette's declaration of independence had taken him by surprise. He, who was almost never surprised. And in the midst of anger, fear, a storm of adrenaline and testosterone, he felt--not pride, because he couldn't claim any responsibility--*admiration*. If Reyes had stood up for himself, back in the day, as well as Chaz had stood up to him, Stephen Reyes might be tenured faculty, a senior professor somewhere.

Would he still want it?

The front door buzzer sounded. Reyes looked down at the open novel and realized he'd read and understood less than half a page since he'd sat down. *There's Falkner's answer: I'm cheating Easy Rawlins.* Besides, the narrative was too close to things that were scraping at Reyes. He should have picked up something in which talk show hosts were murdered with knitting needles or ferrets solved mysteries.

The buzzer again, which meant it probably wasn't someone pushing all the buttons in hopes someone would answer. He balanced the book on the chair arm, stood, and crossed the room to the security system. The little monitor showed a woman in a dark blue uniform, holding an envelope and an electronic clipboard. The image was contrasty from the building's entry lights.

"Who is it, please?" he asked.

"Globe Express. Delivery for Stephen Reyes." Her voice was almost without inflection, as if she'd identified herself too often for one day. Reyes buzzed her in.

He and Walter Mosely were clearly doing each other no good. Time to rent some videos, cook something long and involved, fill the empty corners with soundtrack and explosions and the smell of peppers and onions.

Reyes opened the door at the knock. The courier was small--smaller than the security camera had made her look--and thin, and so pale her skin had a bluish translucence, like skim milk. She peered at him, eyes sharp behind an impromptu veil of limp light-brown hair. They were brown and startlingly dark, out of balance with the indeterminate rest of her.

'You Stephen Reyes?" The words came out like nails from a nail gun. Her voice was deeper than he'd expected. She had what some linguists called the Nerd Accent: it suggested she'd learned to speak in complex words and sentences before her facial musculature was fully developed. Reyes heard traces of it every day at the office, though Chaz modulated better than the average MIT graduate.

"Yes."

"Sign, please." She thrust the pad at him, the stylus balanced across the top. Her fingers were callused, cuticles split as if working with dusty boxes dried them out. Her forearms were skinny, but ridged and strong. He spotted a series of bruised parallel scrapes on her left wrist, and wondered about domestic violence.

If he asked her, she'd have an innocent explanation.

When he looked up from his electronic signature, he found her staring past him into his apartment, tilting her head for a better view. "Thank you," he said, putting the suggestion of an edge on it.

Either she didn't notice, or she didn't care. That went with the accent. Asperger's? She took the pad back from him and handed him the thin next-day-delivery cardboard envelope. "Nice place."

"Hey, you! Delivery girl!"

The woman's head snapped 'round to look. Reyes leaned out into the hall. His neighbor Max stood outside his door, freckled pink scalp shining under the recessed ceiling lights, bifocals halfway down his nose, long-sleeved polo shirt tucked into the elastic waist of his old-guy jeans.

"Did you see a newspaper out there as you came in?"

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, as if looking for something other than an old white man with lousy manners. "No."

"Some kid probably swiped it as a novelty item," Reyes offered. "They're going out of fashion, Max."

Max glowered and snorted. "Like all the rest of us, I suppose. Damnation." He snorted again and pulled back into his apartment like a startled turtle.

The little courier turned back to Reyes and tilted her head. "Have a nice day," she said in her surprisingly gruff voice, and grinned. Her teeth were small and not quite regular. After a last look over his shoulder, she marched down the hall and into the stairwell.

Reyes closed and locked the door. He examined the envelope carefully--the UNABOMB case was not such a distant memory--but it was too thin to have anything inside but paper. The return address on the waybill was faint and smudged by pressure on the top copy of the multipart form. A P.O. box in Newark, he thought. He zipped the pull strip on the envelope as he walked toward the kitchen, then shook the contents out on the counter.

Two sheets of paper: photocopies, several generations removed from the original, of what looked like newsletter articles. The running head on the well-designed one read *Conceal This! Vol. 7, No. 3 October 2003*. The other appeared to have been produced on an electric typewriter, complete with double spaces after the periods, and the serif on the upper left corner of the capital W was missing. It looked like the first page of the newsletter. The name of that one was *America Watches*, and the date was June, 1987.

The article text seemed to be the same on both, excepting typos. "US Government Human Experimentation," no byline. Secret government agency kidnapping exceptional individuals from hospitals, schools, and mass transit in the service of a project to produce superhumans. Mysterious disappearances, unidentified remains.

Lost time, strange lights in sky, Reyes finished, since the article seemed to have forgotten those touchstones of extra-natural conspiracy theory. He wasn't sure if he'd seen the article before, or just the dozens that flew the same ideas, like paper airplanes, over the map of Nutcakeia.

He'd be amused, if only the residents of Nutcakeia hadn't decided to put him on their mailing list. It was the price of trying to get information on the anomaly in and out past the Bureau's radar, the price of the stories he told Dr. Beale--off the record and under the table. He also slipped pointers to cases and documents to the most reputable members of the fringe press. Sol could have done a better job of it, and might have been glad to, but if the FBI was going to fire someone over it, the someone ought to be Reyes.

The stories were picked up and passed on from one publication to another, usually down the food chain of sanity rather than up. There were now

enough people out there who associated Reyes with stories like these that they tried to drag him into whatever theory they'd concocted: *High-ranking FBI agent confirms secret alien invasion!*

Gammas weren't the only humans who developed mythologies, and the human brain was well-adapted to building conspiracy theories.

But Reyes had a much nicer apartment than Fox Mulder, and a bigger TV, and wouldn't eat a Banquet Frozen Dinner if it got down on its knees and begged him. He was also pretty sure his cause of death was likely to be something other than autoerotic asphyxiation. He had more of a life. All right, that wasn't saying much, but nobody would quibble with it.

He slid the recycling bin out from under the sink and dropped the pages into it. The envelope had a stick-on plastic sleeve for the waybill, so he tore that off before the envelope followed its contents. He tossed the sleeve and the waybill in the kitchen trash and dusted his hands on his sweats. Time to get back to that life he was so proud of having.

*

The clerk at Beltway Video was perfectly civil, but Reyes was aware in a prickly way of being the last customer in the store and the proximity of closing. All he could do was smile when the man--the kid, really, still living at home and sporting blue-black hair and ebony rings through his earlobes big around as bears' claws--handed him the DVD boxes and his rental receipt.

The clerk locked the door behind him when he stepped out, the red tint of the "open" sign suddenly subtracted from the street lighting.

He zipped his jacket against the chill and jogged across the empty street and halfway down the block to the eight-car lot carved out for the benefit of local businesses. The Caddy sat in solitary state, its nose to the low cinder block wall that separated the lot from the alley.

The price of personal safety was eternal vigilance. When Reyes joined the Bureau he'd been aware nearly to the point of paranoia of the times and places when people were vulnerable to robbery, kidnapping, murder, carjacking. He could imagine his name somewhere under a headline reading "FBI agent shot with own gun," and thought if the bullet didn't kill him, the embarrassment would.

Now that awareness worked in the background. Not unlike reading music: you started with a painstaking association of *that* mark on *that* line standing for *that* note produced by *that* position of the fingers for *that* length of time. Eventually you saw a series of marks and formed those sounds, and everything between seeing and sounding was background processing.

He was aware of the empty street, the empty parking lot, the uninterrupted span of gravel under the car, the lack of motion in the alley beyond the wall, as background information one needed before thumbing the button to unlock the driver's side. When he opened the door, he checked the back seat in the glow of the dome light.

He slid behind the wheel, locked the door again, and tossed the DVDs into the passenger seat. He turned the key in the ignition. The fluttering whine of the engine turning over, over, over, and not catching made his stomach drop. *If this were a movie, I'd have just enough time to realize that it was about to explode.* But it didn't.

He sighed.

Why did people feel like this about their cars? It wasn't a child with measles. It was a *machine*, it wasn't in pain, you called a tow truck to haul it to the garage and fix it. Still, he patted the dash before he popped the hood lock and stepped out to see what he could see. Before he wedged himself into the narrow space between the wall and the Caddy--*Don't park so damned close next time, Stephen*--he gave the alley one more glance. Through the darkness, no sound. No sign of a soul, and no sense of being watched.

The little work light for the engine compartment was barely enough to check the oil by. He set the prop to hold the hood up and fished again in his jacket pocket for his keys and his LED pinlight.

A creak. A savage blow across the back of his head. Pain, pressure, his vision gone to black and red and a blaze of white. *The hood fell on me?* The thought, muzzy.

As he tried to stand he realized his head was on the engine block and the pale shape in front of his nose was a small, light-skinned hand. He levered himself half up, but something behind his head slammed him down again, again, and he didn't know anything else.

Act III

Falkner was usually the first of the team in, especially on Monday morning. This morning she'd found Bekk hunched over the *Washington Post* -- open on the breakfast table -- like a sick cat preparing to eject a hairball.

Bekk wasn't, it turned out, physically sick. She was only trying to puzzle out right and wrong from the coverage of the shelling of Gaza. Falkner had needed to cut a half hour of parenthood out of the FBI agent's time, like the nub on a jigsaw puzzle piece that claimed the hole in the next piece over.

The team were adults. They could manage without her for half an hour. She hoped.

When she stepped out of the elevator she found herself shoulder-to-shoulder with Pete Pauley, their liaison with the Behavioral Analysis Unit. With his conservative dark suit, close-cropped glinting hair, and stern, sunburnt face, he hardly needed the Bureau ID clipped to his pocket. Then he saw her and grinned, and ten years and a bushel basket of authority dropped away from him.

"Agent Falkner," he said, with a nod that managed to sketch in the respectful tipping of a cowboy hat.

"Morning, Pauley. Any update on Larry Peretti?"

He shrugged. "Whole lotta nothin'. Maybe this is your kind of show, and he disappeared into thin air."

"No Penn and Teller gamma yet, thank God." So far they'd dealt only with the slightly impossible, not the outright miraculous. Falkner was grateful for the small favor.

She continued down the hall to where the respectability of the BAU stretched and grew thin, and Pauley walked beside her. He said, "I tell myself, 'We're going to feel stupid when he shows up with a good excuse.'"

"Like?"

"Depends on your definition of a good excuse. None of mine sound any good now." Pauley stopped at the door to Shadow Unit's bullpen.

"Do you know him?" Falkner asked.

"I know his rep. Both before he started with your team and after. Seems like, well, once you retire under those circumstances, you should be in the clear. Like you've used up all the bad shit that can happen in a lifetime."

Falkner gave him a small smile. "You should."

Pauley's gaze over her shoulder passed through the wall to somewhere at least three states away. "A man ought to be able to go down to the bar on a Saturday afternoon and watch the game with his friends. Think back to what went right in his life. Shrug off what went wrong." His shoulders rose in unison with his vision, and he brought his eyes back to Falkner. "Guess that's why I want to think he found a sympathetic waitress who's great in the kitchen."

She had always thought she would be glad when Peretti left. But it seemed when someone went missing, you missed them, even if you only missed wishing they would go away. "When he wasn't joking around, he was entirely a by-the-book man. I think he would've left his wife a note, at the very least. Even if it was just to say, 'Don't look for me.'"

Pauley gazed back the way they'd come; she suspected it was only to increase the effect when he swung back to meet her eyes. "That doesn't leave much besides misadventure."

Well, someone had to say that out loud. "Let me know if anything turns up, will you?

"Will do." He continued on, bound for whatever errand she'd interrupted.

Chaz Villette and Daphne Worth were in Hafidha Gates's high-tech lair, doing something on the computer. It could be World of Warcraft and she wouldn't mind right now. Hafidha was still being brisk and professional and brutally cheerful, the shell over her grief a mile thick and polished like a Mercedes. Chaz and Daphne were good for her.

In the kitchenette, Daniel Brady was pouring coffee into a blue mug. She hooked down one for herself, and Brady held the pot ready without her asking.

As he poured and the divine-smelling steam rose up in her nose, she said, "Did you talk much with Larry Peretti before he left?"

Brady quirked one eyebrow. "Kind of what we do around here."

"About personal things. His home life, emotional conflicts--"

He blew across his black coffee to cool it, but that didn't disguise the wary turn of his head. "We're *guys*. We communicate stuff like that in grunts."

She wanted to respond with a dry joke. But that was a luxury. "Peretti's been missing since Wednesday before last."

Brady opened his eyes wide, but didn't interrupt.

"If he told you anything he might not have mentioned to me..."

"As in, did he have a secret life? Would he abandon his wife? No."

"He's a good Catholic, but he and Nonni never had children."

Brady sipped coffee and frowned. At last he said, "He was drunk one night and said she couldn't conceive, and he hated that she blamed herself for that, because breeding is only about breeding, but love is about love."

"Peretti said that?"

"He was really drunk."

"Still." Why hadn't she wondered what it would be like to be a conservative Italian who didn't have kids?

"Yeah. I almost said something about me. But I didn't want to push his enlightenment."

Falkner carried her coffee and her coat to her office. It was strange to come in with her team already present and busy. Chaz wandered into the bullpen as she stopped in her doorway. Nikki Lau headed him off at his desk and engaged him in a conversation that seemed to demand broad gestures and competing diagrams on scratch paper. Brady rattled out sentences on his keyboard and frowned at his monitor. Worth threaded between the furniture by invisible proximity sensors, apparently, since she never raised her eyes from the handful of printout she was reading. Solomon Todd was using the windows at the end of the room as a light table, holding a strip of 35 millimeter film in its protective sleeve against the glass and examining it with a loupe.

She checked her mail, but found no updates on Peretti. So she strode out of her office to the next door that opened into the bullpen. "So there's nothing

new--?"

The chair behind Reyes's desk was empty.

The office wasn't big enough that he could be in it and she not see him as she came in, unless he was hiding behind the door on purpose. Still, she surveyed it and the top of the desk for any sign Reyes had arrived and stepped out again. No cup of tea cooling on the blotter, no sign that the stacks of files had been moved since he'd fiddled with them on Saturday. His monitor was dark.

Reyes always came in after her, and usually stayed later. He wasn't a morning person. Still-- He might have had an appointment elsewhere, or an early meeting. Wouldn't he have mentioned that on Saturday, when they talked about coming in? He was just late, that was all. It was nothing.

And Larry Peretti hadn't been seen for nearly two weeks.

Falkner ducked back into the bullpen. Lau was walking back from Chaz's desk when Falkner flagged her down. "Have you seen Reyes?"

Lau shook her head. "Could be traffic. Maybe a reroute for a motorcade. Want me to check?"

"No." Falkner reinforced it with a head shake. "It's not that late." Then she wondered, *Why shouldn't she check? What am I afraid I'll find out?* Since what happened to Chaz--and even in her head, Falkner found herself still using those comforting, euphemistic phrases--if the team was going to be late for something, they called. Even Reyes.

Lau nodded a little too quickly and went on to her desk.

Falkner gazed past her and saw Todd had turned away from the window; he was keeping her in his peripheral vision. Falkner raised her chin, and he stopped pretending he wasn't watching. She flicked her gaze toward her office, then went in and sat down. A moment later, Todd closed her door behind him and slid into the seat across from her desk.

She said, "Peretti's missing, but that doesn't mean we should be paranoid."

"True."

"Am I hearing a 'but'?"

Todd leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Actually, you're hearing a 'nonetheless.' Paranoid is the word for 'survival instinct' used by people who've never had to survive."

Falkner sighed. She picked up her phone and pressed four digits. While she waited for an answer, she muttered to Todd, "Pollyanna."

"Security," a female voice said in the phone receiver.

"This is SSA Esther Falkner. Has Stephen Reyes signed in?"

"One moment, please." Quiet on the line, before the woman came back on. "No, he hasn't. Shall I call you when he does?"

"That won't be necessary. Thank you." She hung up, met Todd's eyes, then dialed Reyes' number. After four rings, she heard, "This is Stephen Reyes. Leave a message."

"Reyes, it's Falkner." *Now what do I say? "You've disappeared, please call if you get this?"* She settled for, "I'm at the office. Call me back." She hung up.

Todd said, "He's probably stuck in traffic."

"From Dupont Circle."

"It happens."

"And Peretti?"

"Accident, suicide, amnesia, mad dash for the border..."

"Because correlation isn't, et cetera, et cetera. What's the 'survival instinct' version?"

"Someone's hunting the people who hunt gammas."

For a man who'd just said what he'd said, he looked almost serene. Falkner met his eyes, and he met hers, for a good six seconds.

"He'll be annoyed," Todd said finally.

"Do it anyway."

*

His head hurt.

Not like the tension headaches, not a strap tightening, tightening around his skull. This was throbbing all over, radiating from somewhere near where his hairline used to start. The pain itself blurred the location.

When he tried to raise his hands to feel out the problem, his arms wouldn't lift. That worried him, and worry made him swallow reflexively, even though his mouth was dry. When his throat worked, he felt it press against something circling his neck, like a too-tight collar band but thinner. It pressed harder if he leaned forward, until he gagged. Even asleep, he seemed to have learned not to do that.

Open your eyes, open your eyes. He would, and maybe he *had*, but it wasn't helping, and the skin of his nose and temples and the hairs in his eyebrows pulled and stuck against something--

His eyes were covered with tape, his arms were tied behind him, and there was a cord around his neck holding him upright.

Panic emptied his mind for who-knew-how-long. Maybe he struggled or made noise; he didn't remember. He must have thrashed against the ligature, because he felt himself about to vomit, and it pulled him back into himself. Panic wasn't effective, and he needed effective, so he grabbed for facts, observations, patterns, and piled them up like sandbags for protection.

The blindfold was encouraging; it suggested he was meant to be released unharmed. His hands were tied efficiently, but not so tight that he was losing circulation. Also encouraging.

The binding at the throat was a bad sign; it spoke of unnecessary torment, sadism, torture. The blitz attack--

No, it wasn't an unplanned, disorganized assault. He'd been lured out of the car, maneuvered into turning his back. He remembered the parking lot, the engine not catching. A careful predator, one who thought subtly and in advance about how to take prey.

Victim chosen by opportunity. Not put off by the available prey being male and thus typically more difficult to subdue. And he hadn't been hard to subdue, had he? No time even to reach toward his pistol. God, his head *hurt*.

He was cold; the flexible armor of his leather jacket was gone, and his t-shirt failed to hold his body heat. But he felt no strong currents of air, and heard

no outdoor sounds, so he was probably indoors. The floor was hard. His legs, he realized, were stretched out in front of him and tied at the ankles. They weren't tied to anything but each other. He lifted them and brought the heels of his running shoes down just firmly enough to make a noise. Wood, not concrete or thin carpet.

He still had his shoes.

He stretched his fingers downward behind him (it was a square pillar he was tied to, because the corners dug into his shoulder blades and forearms) and felt the seams between planks that were smoothed only by age. The wood jabbed a splinter into his right middle finger. A barn or garage loft, or an attic--not the ground floor, or the planks would be damp and colder.

If he was concussed--and he probably was, from a blow hard enough to knock him unconscious--it might not be too bad. Head injuries. It was hard to tell. His brain could be swelling inside his skull, and he wouldn't know it until he pitched over in a coma. God, his head was splitting.

He wasn't confused, though. Okay, maybe a little bleary and muddled. But functional. Probably not a depressed skull fracture, then. Gift horses, receipt of. Move on.

Unfortunately, "on" got him to a full bladder and a dry, sticky mouth. *Beer before kidnapping is probably a lousy idea.*

Sense of humor, intact. Score one for the home team. He could hear traffic sounds, intermittently and far away: a diesel truck, the harsh popping roar of a motorcycle or a street racer. No voices, no breathing, no human noises except his own. He hadn't been gagged, which was interesting.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Nothing, so he repeated it, shouting. Shouting was a bad idea. It kicked up his adrenaline, and the panic response, and next thing he knew he was screaming instead of thinking.

Focus. There were no fates worse than death. There were worse ways to die than thirst and cold. Weren't there? Chaz could tell him. Think of the fierce will to live that had got Chaz off the floor of his grandparents' dining room and out the front door. He could show a little of that. *If I hadn't studied kidnappers and serial killers, would I be more afraid, or less?*

Focus on the moment.

But the moment lasted forever.

When he heard car tires crunching over gravel outside, he told himself to feel relieved. Even if it was the UNSUB--and it most likely was--he might get the chance to learn more about where he was and why he was there. At the very least, maybe he'd be able to change position. The throbbing of his head competed with the creeping aches and numbness in his arms, neck, ass. Changing position would be good.

The sound of a closing door downstairs made him more sure this was his captor. A rescuer would either come in with force or stealth. Firm steps on groaning wooden stairs off to his right told him the new arrival was confident and unhurried. After that, silence fell, and he couldn't tell where the UNSUB was.

Of course. That was the point. This was a calculating hunter.

Reyes said as calmly as he could, "I'm awake."

The cord around his throat jerked. Before he could react, the cord was loose, and a foot against his shoulder pushed him forward onto the floor. He grunted to show the UNSUB was in control, and had the power to reduce his pain.

A woman's voice, with a Midwestern accent: "Waiting long?" She spoke rapidly, each word a burst of sound, but with very little inflection. Hadn't he heard a voice like that recently?

Reyes said tentatively, "I don't know. I remember Saturday."

"That's nothing. Try waiting as long as I have."

Female UNSUB--facts about violent female subjects unspooled in his head. This one had subdued a fit male victim and transported him from the site of the attack. Unless she had a partner...

"It's been hard for you, hasn't it?" Reyes said. *Build the connection. Be the one who understands.*

But she rolled him onto his back, again with her foot, and the pain in his arms stole his voice for a gasp. He felt her approach, heard her breathing come closer as she squatted beside him and lifted his shoulders to fold him upright. He thought the surface she gave him to lean against was her knee,

bony against his spine. Her breath stayed slow and easy: lifting him was no work for her. But she might be a big woman, though her hands felt no larger than his own.

She hooked her fingers under his armpits and stood. The shift in weight dragged his arms back and out against the cords, compressed his painfully full bladder, and made his head throb to a salsa beat. He grunted, then bit his lip to still complaint. If she was a psychopath or a gamma, the evidence of his pain would only encourage her. A baseline might feel human sympathy. Too soon yet to tell. He wished he could see her expressions.

She dragged him up onto something--bump, bump. Waist-height and heavy enough not to rock under his weight. Bolted to the floor? Possibly: he didn't feel it move at all. There was a sick, thick, awful scent he recognized--stale blood, dried brown and flaking. Machine oil, too, and sawdust. *I'm in a workshop. Oh, fucking hell.* Something cool pressed either side of his skull. His own weight pinned his arms and wrenched his shoulders back as she held him down with an improbably strong hand. Another cord cut his throat, snugged tight--no, a wire: he heard the metal creaking as she tightened it.

"You don't have to kill me," he said. "My name is Stephen Reyes. I can be valuable to you. I--" The hand left his chest and shoved down on his face. He tried to bite, and felt a moment of horror at the texture between his teeth before he realized it was leather, a leather glove. He arched his back, but the wire choked him.

When the cool surfaces at his temples tightened with a greasy clicking of gears, he realized it was the maw of a leather-wrapped vise.

She lifted her hand from his face. He made a sound. He meant it to be a word, a plea, but it came out a kind of whining inhuman whimper. He gathered himself, found his voice, made it as reasonable and calm as he could--under the circumstances, not very. While she bound his ankles down, he said, "I'm worth more to you alive. I can help you. I *want* to help--"

She grabbed his chin and yanked. Mouth open--*strongest muscles in the body*--head immobilized, he could not resist her. Something went into his mouth. Hard, round. Huge enough to strain his jaw. It pressed his tongue back in his mouth and for a moment he was afraid he would choke, but then it popped behind his teeth and nested there snugly.

He felt her move, the creak of floorboards under her feet, the drag of cords across his cheeks pulling down snug on either side. He wanted to protest, but the sounds he made around the ball gag were a muffled mewing. His words were his only weapon, and she'd disarmed him as easily as that.

"This will hurt," she said, her voice moving from below him to above. Crouching to standing? "You shouldn't have woken up so quickly. Most normal people wouldn't have." She spoke with the calm assurance of expertise and experience. He heard metal rattle, the clink of forged steel, the rustle of cloth.

His heartbeat thudded in his ears, at the pulse points under his stretched, aching jaw, in the bruised wound on his head. If the hypertension was going to kill him, he could think of worse times than now. The woman slid her thumb under his lip, prying it up as if she were inspecting the mouth of a horse, a show dog, a slave on the block. The vise and the wire held his head still. he could not pull away. He felt her picking at the edge of his bridgework, scraping the surface of a molar with her glove. "Transmitters," she muttered.

He knew what was coming before the cold edge of the chisel touched his gum.

*

Reyes came back to consciousness on the floor, his hands numb and his head splitting. Nausea racked him. Oh, God. He couldn't think of vomiting. By texture and the sound, the object she pressed to his lips was a styrofoam cup. "Drink. Your kind can go without food for a long time. But dehydration'll kill you like that." He heard a snap of fingers.

He'd never thought of his sense of smell as particularly good, but apparently it could identify water. Even through blood and the piss with which he'd soiled himself, it could identify water. There might be something odorless *in* the water, but his reptile brain couldn't be bothered with that now. When she tipped the cup, he parted his lips and let the contents flood across his sticky tongue, thankful that it was tepid. It still hurt, hurt beyond him having words for the hurt. Experimentally, he probed with his tongue. She'd taken out two molars, a bicuspid, and the bridge. Left the three thousand dollar crown, though, which was sort of reassuring: she couldn't tell an enamel veneer from a real tooth, apparently.

And he knew something about her mythology now.

He swallowed, his own blood sharp and cloying on the back of his tongue, and let her fill his mouth with water again. He imagined it soaking into the tissues as if they were garden soil.

William Villette made his son drink from his hands.

He got several swallows before she took the cup away. He heard her finish what was left, then set the cup down.

She was caretaking. That could be a good sign, depending on why she was doing it. "I'm afraid I need to piss again," he said, trying to sound apologetic about it.

"Feel free."

Not the answer he was hoping for.

He was silent long enough for her to notice. "It's a bitch to be housebroken, isn't it? Do you pee in a cup at work?" He heard a finger tap styrofoam. "You people think you can't trust anybody including you. There's tests and samples when you don't know to look for it. And watching."

He *had* heard that voice. Something about her words--someone had said something like that to him recently. No, that wasn't it...

You people. Alienating, creating distance between herself and him. Making him Other. It could be for his race or gender or class, but the phrase came packaged with what sounded like paranoia, so he'd bet on Other Equals Government.

"I trust you," he said. "You gave me water. My name is--"

"I know your name."

Something coarse scratched along the side of his face, from the tape over his eyes down his cheek, where it felt like fire. He flinched involuntarily. *Natural reactions are fine. She wants natural reactions.*

The woman said, "I went back for your toothbrush. Red handle, the angle kind. Do you replace it every three months?"

The bristles of a toothbrush on his face. He could see it, red and white and clear plastic, dangling in the holder in his bathroom. The irony would have

made him bark with laughter if the swelling in his jaw hadn't precluded it. She said she'd gone *back*--

The Globe Express delivery. The copies of the newsletter articles. The courier, the small woman who talked like bursts of automatic fire.

Not an opportunistic choice of victim. An organized and intelligent offender, one who took pleasure in her control over her victims, and their awareness of that control. Her prey was identified, stalked, surveilled. Had she meant to attack him at his apartment, but Max's appearance made her wary? Or had that been counting coup, proof of her superiority over him, an opportunity to prove she could approach him whenever she pleased?

A small woman couldn't have raised him to a sitting position effortlessly. Unless she was host to the anomaly.

Something small and hard, a blunt point, pressed suddenly against the pulse point in his throat. The end of the toothbrush handle. *She's going to kill me with my damned toothbrush.*

She wouldn't have knocked out his teeth if she meant to kill him right away. Right now, he wasn't sure that made him happier. *Your team will find you,* he told himself sternly. *They're the best in the business. All you have to do is trust them and stay alive.*

If his mouth hadn't been so swollen, he might have smiled, despite the threat of the toothbrush handle. Trust was the one thing he was demonstrably *ass* at.

Then the pressure was gone; the knee under his back jerked, and he heard something small clatter across the floor. "Your apartment's a show room, Steve. Is it you? Or is it what America wants you to be? Was that really a picture of your mom? Or just a photo of some woman we're supposed to think is your mom?"

Reyes said, "She's going to be worried about me. I'm her only child. You know my name is Stephen. Will you tell me yours?"

"No." Her hand clenched in the front of his t-shirt. It pulled him up, punched down on his breastbone, slammed his back against the floor. He fought to get the air back in his lungs, to stay alert past the bolt of pain through his head, the grinding of shattered tooth fragments in his jaw.

"What do you want?" he asked, when he thought he could speak without whimpering.

She said, "Do you like your job?"

*

There was an unofficial network of "just in case" keys within the WTF. Even in that bullpen full of hard-headed realists, nobody was ever explicit about the occasions that might call for that extra key. When Todd had passed his to Chaz, he'd said, "Your sympathies may urge you otherwise, but don't overfeed the fish."

Todd knocked at the door of Reyes' condo, then used the key he'd been given just in case.

His pistol was in his hand, beside his right thigh. No point in alarming the neighbors if he didn't have to. He pressed the door open lightly and switched to a two-handed grip.

Daylight filled the space beyond the door. Todd heard his own breathing and nothing else. "Steve? Are you here?"

He wanted to find Reyes sleeping off a hangover on the couch, or trapped in his bathroom by a busted door latch. He'd settle for finding him with a broken ankle and no phone in reach, or even delirious with the flu. No reason to think he wouldn't find him *alive*.

Maybe Reyes would be embarrassed. Maybe he'd say, "If you thought I was in danger, why did you come alone?" And Todd could explain that Reyes might not have been in danger, and Todd and Falkner, who'd given the order, were just protecting Reyes's privacy, and Reyes could point out that in an emergency, privacy was a luxury.

Except if he was there and arguing, it wouldn't be an emergency.

Todd stepped in and closed the door. "Steve?" No answer. He went straight for Reyes's bedroom, clearing spaces without analyzing them until he got there.

The covers on the bed were pulled tight, without a wrinkle. The master bathroom was clean and empty. So was the half bath in the hall. The queen of bloody England could come to visit without notice, and think Reyes had a well-kept, pleasant, manly, modern home. Did he use a cleaning service?

Had he spruced up for a visitor? What was Reyes like when no one was around?

Stephen Reyes, the tree that falls in the forest.

Todd pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves. *This is going to look pretty odd if Reyes walks in right now.* But looking odd was a price he'd pay cheerfully to have that happen.

What would have been the second bedroom was Reyes's office. Todd felt a ridiculous pang, looking at it. It was the home office of a man who never went home, but wished he could.

A Spider-man bendable toy clung to the gooseneck of the desk lamp. A bookcase beside the desk held up a collection of references on psychology, criminology, forensics, and physiology. (Frost would make her little sinus-clearing noise and observe, austerely, "For non-physicians.") Travel and history stood on those shelves as well.

The bottom shelf was dedicated to comic book reprint volumes--Superman, Batman, The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, Wonder Woman, Spider-man. Superheroes fighting monsters, because somebody had to do it. These were the old stories, the ones in which the heroes always won eventually. They would have been published originally when Reyes was a kid. The volumes looked pristine; either Reyes didn't read them, or he read them with ridiculous care. Todd wondered where the boxes of bagged and boarded originals were.

The desk occupied the space in front of the paired windows. On the walls to Todd's left and right, two framed movie posters hung like boxers glaring at each other across the ring. One was for the original *Shaft*. The other was for the remake with Samuel Jackson.

Superheroes.

The trash basket held some empty envelopes from utility bills, but nothing else. The desktop was tidy, and the laptop on it was shut. Todd thumbed the catch and opened it. Powered off, and though he might have a key, a laptop password was a little more access than he'd been given. If necessary, Hafidha could deal with it.

He looked back on his way out the door, at the toy on the desk lamp. Spider-man, not Batman. It seemed an important distinction.

Todd went on to the living room. One large shelf unit filled with LPs and another with CDs flanked a collection of stereo equipment ranging from an old reel-to-reel tape deck to an iPod. The flat-panel TV was mounted to the wall above. A black leather recliner, something more high-style than a La-Z-Boy, and wine-red velour couch and armchair grouped around a glass-and-black-iron coffee table like animals at a watering hole. The warm-colored patterned rug underneath was an island in the golden wood of the floor. An empty Negra Modelo bottle sat on the end table next to the recliner; a novel lay open over one of the arms.

Todd wandered into the kitchen. Sleek, modern, well-equipped, and very clean. If Todd hadn't known better, he'd have said no one cooked in it. He played back the messages on the phone. Falkner's was the only one.

In the recycling, on top of the newspapers, bottles, sales flyers, and cans, he found two photocopies and an express envelope. They all bowed and wrinkled the same way, as if they'd been punched in the bin together. Todd laid them on the counter and frowned at them. Had the copies come in the envelope? If so, who paid for express delivery for photocopies of old woo-woo theories? If not, where were the contents of the envelope? And where was the address label? He could see the torn square where it had been.

He found it in the trash. It was dated Saturday.

It didn't look important, and it didn't look connected. But a journalist sometimes developed a sense for what to chase, just as a cop sometimes did. Todd felt that faint hindbrain itch, looking down at his collection of trash. He gathered the debris up to take with him.

Back in the living room, Todd spotted a video rental receipt on the shelf below the television. Two DVDs, *Belle de Jour* and *Iron Man*. He searched around the TV, but didn't find either title. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in the number on the receipt.

A cheerful woman said, "Beltway Video."

"This is Special Agent Solomon Todd with the FBI. I'd appreciate information on two DVDs you rented."

The resulting silence wasn't unexpected. "The FBI?"

"Yes. I know this is unusual, but it may be urgent."

"I think... I think you have to get a search warrant. I won't tell you who's renting what."

Good for you, he thought, in spite of a jab of frustration. "I only need to know if a couple of DVDs have been returned, and if so, when."

"How do I know you're for real?" The woman still sounded stiff and careful.

"You don't. But this would make a very lame prank call."

A pause, while she considered what misuse the government could make of that information. He didn't volunteer that any information could be misused somehow; he just waited.

"If you've got the stock numbers..." she said slowly.

"131254 and 220855, rented a week ago Thursday." It was a good thing Reyes didn't use Netflix, like the rest of the civilized universe. If this were Todd's disappearance, they'd be trying to track him by mail pickups.

"Let me check." She put him on hold. Todd imagined her consulting the other employees before looking the numbers up. But at last she said, "Hello? Those came back on Saturday."

"Can you tell me what time?"

"Eleven-oh-two p.m. Right at closing."

"Thank you," said Todd. He thumbed the red button, then dialed Falkner.

*

Reyes sat up in the middle of the floor, his knees folded nearly to his chest, the knuckles of his bound hands braced on the floor behind him to keep him upright. It wasn't a sustainable position, not for long. But he felt less vulnerable this way than lying on his side, which was his only choice. That felt too much like asking to be kicked again, and it hurt his face.

The fabric of his sweatpants had dried, which was one way to judge the passing of time, at least. The smell of piss became a constant after a while, and was no use.

The woman moved quietly behind him. He only heard her because he knew what he was listening for: the whisper of breath, easy to miss in the sound of distant traffic; the creak of a floorboard just a hair louder than the ticks and groans of a settling house.

Still, he was startled when, on his right, she said, "Tell me about the Anomalous Crimes Task Force." She said it as if tasting it, a slow, deliberate mouthing of the words. It was the first time he'd heard her speak in anything but little verbal explosions.

It wasn't unreasonable for a civilian to know the team's official title. It was how they identified themselves to the public. When they had to identify themselves. Which wasn't often.

He was in the hands of a maybe-gamma who knew in advance about the gamma-hunters. Was this the worst of all possible situations? Probably not. They'd been half-expecting it, even. Funny how that didn't address the suffocating racing of his heart, or how that sent splinters of pain through his head. He clenched his teeth reflexively and regretted it.

"It's quiet in here," she said, down by his feet now. "Yeah, too quiet. Tell me about the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. The FBI's secret recipe."

What should he give her? The truth? What did she want to hear? He needed control of this situation, and he was doing abysmally so far. A concussion could only excuse so much. "What about it?"

"You don't know your lines. You're supposed to say, 'How do you know about that?' Come on. Underestimate me."

"When I'm the one who's tied up?"

"That's good. See, now you sound like the guys on TV." She kicked the sole of his shoe, probably playfully. His knee throbbed, and his jaw and skull, and the impact pushed him back against his knuckles, jammed them against the splintery floor.

She spoke into his left ear, abrupt and soft. "We've got a mutual acquaintance. He said on this stuff you call the plays."

She'd talked to someone. No, someone had talked to *her*. And that might be a humanizing connection. "I'm just a government flunky. What acquaintance do we share?"

His voice was mushy, like the mouth he spoke with. *Who's articulate now?* No. Stop that. She doesn't need any help depersoning you.

Cloth rustled. Then her voice came again, in the careful cadences of a child reading aloud. "Lawrence Peretti, 1237 Hanson St., Maxwell's Grove, New Jersey. He gained weight after this picture."

Peretti. This was where he'd gone--here or somewhere like it. *Let him still be alive.* Because fear made him honest, he added to himself, *Because if she let him live, she might do the same for me.*

Something small and light fell into his lap: Peretti's driver's license, Reyes guessed. Her hand closed hard around his upper arm, and he forgot and clenched his teeth again. *Yes, she's strong. Normal strong? Steroid strong? Gamma strong?*

Too loud beside his ear, she demanded, "I answered your question, so you think you can weasel out of mine?"

Her grip tightened past anything that could be human strong. Tissue pinned against bone, bone stressed to its limits. "I want to help you," he said. "God, please stop. Tell me what you need, and I can help you."

She twisted his arms up and shook him like a wolf snapping the neck of a rat. "Stephen Reyes, keeper of the FBI's secrets. Tell me. How many of us have you helped capture or kill?"

Act IV

Daphne Worth stood on the beach at Coles Point, surrounded by things she'd seen too much of: police cars, mobile crime lab, coroner's van, and people in uniforms with the bored-busy look of doing familiar jobs well.

The Potomac River was gray under a gray sky, with wind helping the outboard motor of the rescue squad's boat kick up a little chop around the pilings of someone's dock.

The pilings from which they'd untangled Larry Peretti's body. If it was Larry Peretti's body. Floaters didn't look very much like the people they used to be.

The odds were pretty good, though. He'd been wearing an engraved wristwatch and a wedding ring.

She knew from the sound of the steps and from the way he stopped just inside her "friends" perimeter that the person behind her was Chaz. "You okay?" he asked, carefully, as if he was afraid asking would make things worse.

"Yeah." She bit the inside of her cheek. "He's the reason I joined up, did you know?" Chaz maintained a sympathetic silence. She honestly couldn't remember if he'd heard it already or not. "Peretti's the one who told me about the WTF. Probably so I'd quit asking questions, but still. He's why I'm here."

"He was retired by the time I came on."

She swallowed down the memories and regrets and anger. "So what have we got?"

"There was a torn plastic garbage bag tied to his waist. As if he was weighted down but the bag caught on something."

"Cause of death?"

"Maybe skull fracture. But there's a lot of visible damage."

"From being in the water?"

"No. He was worked over. Frost will have to tell us if it was before he died, but it wouldn't make sense to do it after. No guess as to time of death or how long he was in the river."

"Or where he went in."

"Not yet."

"I'll call Falkner."

He must have heard the hardness in her voice, because he brushed her forearm with his fingertips. "I'll do it if you want."

Worth shook her head. Peretti got her into this. She could see him out. She slid her phone from her coat pocket and pushed buttons.

"Falkner." Esther Falkner never assumed her caller ID was right. Life might not be that simple.

"It's Peretti. Time and cause of death are still not certain, but Chaz says he was seriously banged up, probably antemortem."

"What the hell was he doing in the Potomac?"

Worth stumbled over that. "I'm sorry?"

"Peretti was last seen at his home in New Jersey."

Suddenly she was colder than the weather could account for. "He was dumped at our doorstep. But he was weighted down, he couldn't have been meant--"

"Worth. Reyes didn't come in today. Todd just reported that he's not at home. He hasn't been seen since Saturday night."

Chaz had circled around where he could see her face, though he made it look as if he was only studying the site. Whatever her expression was, it made him frown and thrust his head forward like a listening bird.

Worth drew the connecting line out loud, so Falkner would know she saw it. "Whoever did this may have been in the area when Reyes went missing."

Chaz's eyes grew round, pupils dilated.

"We don't know if anyone else is involved in Reyes's disappearance. But we'll act on that hypothesis for now. I've sent Brady and Lau to try to pick up his trail."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Return to the office. And watch each other's backs."

Worth fumbled her phone off, awkward with cold and fear.

Chaz's face was grayish, more hollowed-out than usual. Worth was about to ask him when he last ate when he cleared his throat and said, "This is-- Was it like this? When--" He blinked and finished, hoarsely, "In May?"

Her throat closed up. "You don't have to work this if you don't want to. Mom'll understand."

"No. I want to. I didn't--" He shook his head. "I wouldn't wish this on him."

"Jesus." It burst out of her more fiercely than she'd meant it to, and Chaz leaned back, almost stepping away. She got her voice under control. "Chazzie. No one would think that."

Because wanting Texas to disappear in a hurricane was different from wanting a specific sonofabitch you actually knew to go through whatever happened to Peretti.

And they didn't know Reyes was in danger, anyway.

She must have said it aloud. Chaz replied, "Don't make me bring up the C word."

"Correlation, causation, or coincidence?" she asked, like a string of swearing. "We've got plenty to go around." She tossed him the car keys. "Use the party lights. Mom won't want us stopped for speeding."

*

He couldn't breathe. She asked questions, and gave him no time to answer. The first blow had driven the breath out of him, cramped his diaphragm into spasm. The second set him retching, curled on his side, knees drawn up to shield his abdomen from the kicks that followed. There was nothing in his stomach to vomit: the water was gone, soaked up almost instantly. Frost or Villette or Worth could have told him how fast he had metabolized it.

It didn't stop his body from trying.

There were so many new, painful places, but as he cringed from the expected blow, Tinfoil Hat Woman--he needed a better name for her, but that would work for now--stomped on the floor like a petulant child and shuffled back, one step or two. "Think about it," she said. He heard the door slam behind her, her footsteps descending stairs. More evidence that he was above the ground floor.

He wasn't sure how long he huddled there. The door opened once or twice. He heard the lock turn, felt the draft of air. The air was warmer and felt like day. Monday? Tuesday? Blessed Mary, don't let it be Sunday still. He didn't hear her enter or leave, but that didn't mean she hadn't. It was all so dark without his eyes.

What he was supposed to think about, she hadn't said. He straightened his legs slowly, waiting to be hit or kicked. When nothing happened he said softly, "Hello?"

He dragged himself up, on his knees, shoulders and face pressed to the floor. It all hurt, cheeks, forehead. It didn't matter. He was leaving smears of blood

behind when he moved; he felt them slicking the splintery planks. This was a sort of yoga pose, wasn't it? What could he make of that?

When he listened, he heard silence, except for the rasp of his own ragged breathing. With an effort that made him grunt, and sometimes hiss air through his teeth, he inched his bound arms down past his hips, until he was bent double with his hands behind his thighs rather than his back. The cord savaged his wrists. Were they swelling around it? He imagined his hands thickening and darkening with trapped blood, and cut that image away, picturing it drifting off on the winds of his thought. He tipped onto his right side again, trying to muffle the fall. The impact shattered his thoughts into pain once more.

He paused to pant, and to let the burn in his shoulder joints subside. When it had, he tucked his knees tight against his chest and worked his legs through the circle of his arms. As soon as his wrists cleared his feet, he sat upright and peeled the tape off his eyes. It took bits of his eyebrows and lashes with it; he smothered several outbursts at those small, intense hurts.

And now he could see.

He was alone in the room. An attic, with the slope of the roof above, and the walls rough-finished. A thin, faded curtain stretched tight over a window frame in the end wall, but no light passed through it. Did that mean it was dark out, or that the window was blocked? The light came from a bare incandescent bulb in an overhead fixture.

In the wall opposite the window was a wooden paneled door with light-green moulting paint. That would be the door to the stairs. Next to it rested an old dinette chair, the kind made of chrome tubing with a vinyl-covered padded seat. The styrofoam cup sat upright on the floor beside a chair leg. The work table was still there, still bolted to the floor, still caked in blood, but she'd removed the vise and the tools.

He untied his ankles (she'd used electrical cord) and massaged some circulation back into his legs. He might be able to untie the cord around his wrists with what was left of his teeth, maybe, with time. He might not have time. He might not have the guts to endure that much pain. She might be in the house. He needed to get out, get to a road and flag down a car, find a nearby dwelling--maybe just find a hiding place.

He stumbled to the window. The curtain was stapled to the frame with demented thoroughness, but he managed to pinch enough fabric at the edge of the staples to pull and tear it free. The destruction revealed wood-panel shutters, closed, the hinges on the inside. Who the hell put shutters on the *inside?*

The latch was rusty. He scrabbled at it with his bound hands. How high up was he? Two stories? Three? Would there be anything he could climb down or fall on? And how long did he have before Tinfoil Hat came back?

The latch grated back, and the shutters swung toward him.

There were bars on the windows. New, sturdy, made of steel, and the emergency escape handle had been snapped off. Light glittered off the irregular planes of fatigued, broken metal. Reyes wondered if she'd done it with her bare hands.

Outside he could see the clouded night sky, a dirt lane, the lights of traffic passing on the road less than a mile away. Another planet away. *What would Spidey do?*

He clutched one bar with his bound hands, tried to shake it, banged at it with his fists, realized at last he was gasping for air and fighting against the little percussive noises in the back of his throat that wanted to escape. Escape. He pressed his aching forehead to the cool steel and counted his breathing: four beats in, four beats out. So hard to concentrate.

Downstairs, a door opened.

He crossed the attic floor in as few light strides as he could and grabbed the dinette chair. Then he pressed himself against the wall behind the door and waited.

He heard the creaking of the attic stairs. When she stepped through the door, he had just time enough to register the small, skinny woman he'd last seen in a delivery uniform. He brought the chair down on her head as hard as he could and shoved past her to the stairs.

He heard her right behind him as he half-fell down the narrow attic steps, grazing his bound hands on the wall for support. He came out into an uncarpeted hallway smelling of mildew. On one side, a bannister guarded the open staircase to the first floor. He used the newel post to slingshot himself

onto the landing. *Beat her to the bottom of these stairs. Find something else to slow her down. Then you're out.* He lunged downward.

Above him, a howl like an angry dog, and a terrible mechanical screech of wood and iron. He had just enough time to look up and see the bannister crashing down on him, the woman in the hallway above with her arms still outstretched. The oak top rail struck his face, sent him sprawling across the stair treads.

He was barely aware of the weight lifting off him. She dragged him to his feet and backhanded him. His head bounced off the wall, threw his vision into sparks. Then she hauled him back up with two fistfuls of his t-shirt, cotton threads popping as it cut into his armpits.

"I won't let you go!" she screamed in his face, and he squeezed his eyes shut, because he couldn't shut his ears. "Not until I know *everything!* I'll nail you to the wall and *rip* the truth out of you! Do you understand me?"

He nodded--or maybe his head just fell forward, he wasn't sure which. He hoped it looked like a nod.

"You will." She let go, and he slid down the wall. He felt her grasp his ankles and pull him back up the stairs, through the ruin of the balustrade. He tried to lift his head so it wouldn't hit the edge of each stair as she dragged him over it. He tried to ask her to let him stand, sit, rest. Those things didn't seem to happen.

I am not playing well. Not well enough to win.

Was she angry? No, she was humming. He listened as she hauled him feet-first back up the attic stairs, listened to her voice echo off the walls. For a moment he almost recognized the song, but the tune disappeared in a shift of key, a muddle of rhythm, the graying-out of his awareness.

*

Falkner met Daniel Brady as she came out the door of Beltway Video. "The clerk who closed on Saturday night described Reyes pretty clearly. He was alone, and didn't seem to be in distress."

Brady gave her a thoughtful look that might have been the product of trying to imagine Reyes in distress. "CSIs are processing the car," he said. "Lau's canvassing residents across the alley in case anyone saw anything."

They walked down the street to the parking lot, where Reyes's black Cadillac was barricaded in with police tape. Falkner had seen him arrive in it one day, shortly after he bought it, and raised her eyebrows. Several hours later, when they were both at the coffee maker, he'd said, "My father always wanted a Cadillac."

Oh, Stephen, she'd thought, but of course, hadn't said.

Now she tried to see the Caddy as a piece of evidence. She stood on the gravel and looked back at the video store, imagining night, an empty street, a trim, smallish black man crossing diagonally toward her. There would be someone else here, too, but out of sight, or not threatening. Would Reyes have fallen for a Ted Bundy scam? The crutch, or a flat tire, or a dead battery?

The CSIs, Maher and Reindl, were pulling prints off the driver's side door handle. Falkner peered in the window on the passenger's side. "Are you done with this one?" she called over the roof.

"Go ahead," Reindl called without raising her head.

Falkner pulled on the nitrile gloves from her pocket and tried the door. Locked. But she could see two DVD boxes on the seat. He'd gotten into the car, then, at least long enough to drop off the new rentals.

She spotted a heap of brown suede on the back seat. It was a jacket of Reyes's that she recalled seeing; it was tossed across the seat as if the driver was done with it.

It had been cold last night, and was brisk even now. Why hadn't Reyes wanted his jacket?

She walked slowly around the back of the car, and Brady joined her. "Wheel wells," he said.

Falkner squatted and looked into the left rear one. "Lot of dirt."

"Given Reyes, I bet this goes to the car wash once a week. So in the last week, where the hell was he off-roading?"

She half-straightened, her hands on her thighs, and studied the ground around her. The lot was gravel, not dirt. The alley was paved. And even if the

car had rolled almost straight from dirt into the parking lot, the marks wouldn't show on this surface.

Brady called from the front of the car. "Something up here, maybe. Like a truck backed into him with a pole sticking out of the bed."

Lau came back as Falkner finished her circuit of the car. "No one saw anything at eleven p.m. Saturday night. No strange vehicles in the neighborhood. Someone did notice that Reyes's car was here all weekend." She made a face. "They thought it must belong to the Russian mob."

Brady snorted.

Falkner saw what Brady had spotted: a ragged hole in the front grille, about three inches across. She crouched and turned her pocket flashlight on the damage. Slowly she put her hand into the hole, careful not to touch the edges. The widest part, at her knuckles, wouldn't clear the metal. She drew it out again.

Brady said, "What is it?" Falkner felt him and Lau tense and focused behind her.

She stood up. Inside the engine compartment, the hood prop would be on the right. You'd lift the hood with your left to free it, then lower the hood with both hands. Which meant an overhand grip *there*, two hands *there* and *there*.

She turned to the CSIs, who were watching her. "Dust the hood," she ordered. "The whole front edge."

"Talk to us," Brady said.

She walked around to the driver's side door, with Brady and Lau trailing after. "Reyes came back to the car, unlocked it, got in, and put the DVDs in the passenger seat. He put the key in the ignition." She peered in the window, trying to see past the steering wheel.

"Not there," Brady told her.

"Okay. But he tried to start the car, and it wouldn't start."

"If it was the battery, the door locks wouldn't have worked."

"So we know it wasn't the battery. He gets out, pops the hood latch, and goes to see what he can see in the engine compartment."

"Does Reyes... Is he much of a motorhead?" Lau asked, with restrained skepticism.

"He'd do it anyway, I think. It's what you do." She walked back around to the front of the car, careful to keep out of the way of the fingerprinting. She faced the car with its damaged grille. "It was dark. He might not have noticed the damaged grille. His back was to the alley. The UNSUB must have been waiting for that."

"How did the UNSUB know the car wasn't going to start?"

Falkner nodded toward the hole in the grille. "That was done to get at the hood latch."

Lau frowned and leaned past the CSIs for a better look. "Pry bar? Crappy chrome, if so. Except I don't see any scratches."

"If somebody reached through that hole, they have a mighty small hand," Brady said. "Remember Eddie Cieslewicz? He wouldn't have needed a pry bar."

"They're there," Maher called, pointing to the hood. "Two different sets."

Falkner looked where she pointed, while the techs photographed the prints. When they finished, she said, "Let's get it open."

Brady went around to the driver's side door. "This one's unlocked." Falkner heard the glower in his voice over that. He leaned in and pulled the latch with a gloved hand, and Falkner lifted the lid.

Lau added her pocket flashlight to Falkner's. "What are we looking for?"

"Anything out of place."

"Mm. The usual, then."

"Well, hello," Falkner heard herself say as her light played over the relays.

Brady ducked and peered at her through the gap between fender and hood.

"Look at this," Falkner said, and held her flashlight on the relays while the other two studied.

"The dust is smudged away on one of them," Lau said.

"I'll bet you a pizza that's the fuel pump relay."

Brady looked at her admiringly. "Now who's the motorhead?"

"You MPs never had to keep anything running," Falkner said, which made him grin. "So someone pulled the fuel pump relay."

"And put it back," Brady added.

Lau was still passing her flashlight over the engine compartment. Suddenly the pool of focused light stopped. "Tweezers, somebody?" Lau asked, and the note in her voice brought Falkner and Brady on the alert like a pair of pointers spotting quail.

Reindl stepped forward and handed her a pair. She leaned into the compartment, heedless of what it might do to the front of her jacket, and plucked something off the engine block. She held it up in the beam of her flashlight.

"Fuck," she said softly.

In the tweezers were a few short, dark, curling hairs, clotted with blood.

*

Falkner was driving, so when his cell phone rang, Brady slid it out of his pocket and checked the caller. "Frost," he told Falkner and Lau, and poked the green button.

"Good afternoon, Agent Brady," Frost said, her voice rasping over the little speaker. "I've completed my examination of Agent Peretti's body."

Interesting how everyone gave Peretti credentials, even after years of retirement. Well, plenty of folks in Texas lived and were buried with the handle of "Colonel" decades after their military days were over. "I've got SSA Falkner and Agent Lau in the car with me. Can I put you on speaker?"

"You may."

Frost's voice wasn't improved by the speaker phone amplification. "Agent Peretti's cause of death was head trauma; specifically, he sustained symmetrical damage on either side of of his skull that crushed the bone inward and placed direct pressure on the brain."

"And the other damage?"

"Antemortem injuries are consistent with physical torture. He was hit with a blunt object, or possibly a fist or foot, which produced contusions in the orbits of both eyes, a broken left eardrum, a cracked collarbone, damage to the kidneys, and extensive lacerations. Whatever hit him was wielded with great force. He was also missing his partial plate, and had six teeth broken out at the gumline."

Lau spoke up from the back seat. "Any chance some of this happened when he was in the water?"

"No, Agent Lau." Frost sounded as if she was trying to be very, very patient with the amateurs. Brady grinned out one corner of his mouth, and Lau rolled her eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor Frost," Falkner said, apparently imperturbable.

Brady disconnected and rode in the passenger seat in silence. No point in saying aloud that what happened to Peretti could be happening to Reyes at that moment. There was such a thing as too much empathy, it turned out.

*

The shutters were still open; the light through the grimy glass was soft and hazy, like morning. Reyes felt the woman's footsteps through the floorboards. *Get up,* he ordered himself, *be aware, be ready.* He struggled up onto his knees and elbows. She hadn't tied his feet while he was unconscious, or untied his hands. Dried blood flaked around the electrical cord twisted at his wrists, but his hands hadn't swelled any further. He must be getting some circulation, then. She'd refined her M.O. with practice. Larry Peretti hadn't been the first.

Reyes waited crouched, forehead on his wrists, until the dizziness lessened.

Shock of sensation, so intense he didn't know what it felt like, only that it *felt*, and all his nerve endings screamed alerts and warnings. Hard things skittered across the floor. When he saw they were ice cubes, he realized what had happened: she'd thrown ice water over him.

Shaking, cold in the cold room, he turned warily to find her. She held an empty blue plastic bucket and watched him, her head turned sideways like a robin listening for insects.

She said, "My stepdad would do that, back when he thought I couldn't talk. He wanted to help. Does it make you feel chatty?"

He didn't try to fight the need to shiver. Shivering would warm him, and she knew he was weak. Better she thought he was weaker than he was. If that was possible. She'd just offered him a personal connection, and he snapped after it like a spider along a shaken strand. "How old were you?"

"What?"

With an effort, he sat back over his heels, straightening up, pulling together a neutral expression, clenching his teeth so they wouldn't chatter. "Why did he think you couldn't talk?"

"Because I didn't."

"Do you know why you didn't talk?"

"Yes."

Open-ended questions. "Why don't you tell me about that?"

She blinked at him, still birdlike. *Birds are dinosaurs. They would eat you if they could.*

He tried again. "You asked me if that photo was my mother. It is. My father is dead. I don't keep his picture out. He didn't come home a lot."

Sorry, Papá. But it wasn't like it was a lie.

She still didn't answer, but she didn't move away either, and Reyes left the silence there so she might fill it. An old interviewer's trick. He had learned its practical applications the hard way, from the wrong side of the desk, in the midst of a personal and professional betrayal that--as a young man--he'd found incomprehensibly huge. Why on earth would a laurel-wreathed elder statesman of the field have a need to steal research from some wet-behind-the-ears colored boy? And who would believe the word of a junior associate professor over that of a tenured legend?

The FBI had seemed like the farthest thing from academia, and his first marriage hadn't survived the transition. Clara was still teaching organic chem at the University of Illinois. She was assistant department head. She had two daughters by a well-regarded poet. He hoped they were happy.

Sometimes, Reyes suspected his other two marriages were casualties of the same conditioning event. His professional relationship with his team... definitely was.

And now he had to trust them anyway. They were coming. He'd failed to rescue himself, but the team would get him out. His team, the wacky misfits in Hoover's white, uptight, and outtasight FBI. Hand-selected by Stephen Reyes because they were superior agents, every one.

They would rescue him. All his other faith had failed him. This one would not. He held to that--intellectually, when he could not believe it in his heart--and tried to think of another, better, more leading question.

Abruptly, the woman spoke. The sound dragged him back to here and now. "You lied about your name," she said. "Just like everything else. Does anybody really know who you are?"

He blinked stinging eyes to try to clear them, but the blurriness seemed to be there to stay. "I told you my name."

"Did you? *Esteban*." She hissed it, with a terrible flat Midwestern accent, and flicked a piece of plastic at him.

He knew what it was without looking. His driver's license.

"Stephen is a nickname," he said, another half-truth. It was professional camouflage. Another fragment of his identity sacrificed to the machine. The American bureaucratic system was set up to handle English names. Period. God forbid you had a matronymic, a patron saint's name, an Indian-style patronymic and village-of-origin like his beautiful friend who had chopped her long, fascinating appellation to the brief, acceptable, unthreatening *Amrita Srinivasan*.

"It doesn't all fit on the driver's license," he said. Something that knows your name has power over you. He nerved himself and recited it like a rosary. "My full name in Spanish is Esteban Santiago Miguel Domingo Reyes Fomosa y Ibarra. Santiago was my grandfather. Miguel is my godfather. Domingo is the saint on whose day I was born. Reyes is my surname. My father's mother's surname is Fomosa, and my mother's surname is Ibarra."

She blinked at him, her face softening into a human expression. "They don't want to admit that you exist either," she said. "They took away your name."

After a moment, Reyes said, "I don't know *your* name. I don't have anything to call you by."

She pulled up the battered dinette chair and sat. "Don't you want to know why I didn't tie your feet up, Steve?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"I know that shrink question thing. Questions, questions, just when you're ready to ask one of your own, boom! Another question. You don't fool me."

"I don't want to fool you."

She stood, moved restlessly around the room. "None of the others ever got loose."

Others. And past tense. His stomach dropped. "Maybe they never did yoga. How many others were there?"

"I'd have to check my notes."

"What kind of notes?"

"Who they were. How they were connected to the experiments. What they told me."

"Peretti was connected?"

She said, scornfully, "If there's something to cover up in America, the FBI is in on it. So I needed FBI agents."

"Peretti?"

"He didn't know enough. I wanted him to tell me about the place where you keep them, the prison, but he never did."

Then Peretti was dead. Reyes couldn't say he was surprised.

Reyes shook his head carefully. "If there's any cover-up being done, it's at the top. Anomalous Crimes is just odd stuff. We're effectively the cold case unit of the FBI." It was the usual lie. Had she heard it? Had she heard more than that?

She knelt in front of him, licked her thumb, then used it to rub something off his cheek. "I've read whatshisname's books. Rupert Beale."

Give her more. Reinforce the connection. "We find some terribly weird stuff. Sometimes people like you. We try to help them when we do."

"Like Beale said in *Curious Crimes*. Some of your cases are enough to make people believe in gods and demons."

"Beale's popular books lean toward florid." Grinning god, what was he doing critiquing literature?

She laughed. "I don't believe in superstitious crap. I believe in science and reason. You can't hide the truth, Steve. Dinosaurs lose. That's just how it is."

*

Hafidha knew Brady was walking across the hall to her sanctum before he knocked on the door. She figured tapping into the building's video cameras was just a wider-ranging version of the bicycle mirror fastened to the side of her monitor. If the precaution never had to earn its keep, so much the better.

"*Entrez, s'il vous plaît,*" she called, and Brady came in like the big brash ray of sunshine he was. Such a contrast to Chaz, who opened the door only as far as necessary and kind of slithered through it.

"Have we got a hit on those prints yet?" Well, not exactly a ray of sunshine today. There was a crease between his eyebrows that would have made a stranger find something else to do, maybe on the other side of town.

"See, I knew you were going to ask that. And sadly, the answer is no. In all that Homeland Security budget, you'd think someone would have included a processor upgrade for IAFIS. But it's only ten years old, why would it need one? say the people who wouldn't be caught dead driving a ten-year-old car."

That should have raised a grin. Brady just stared over her shoulder at her monitor as if it were a vegetarian hamburger. She spun her chair to face him. "Sit," she ordered.

He shook his head. "Got work on my desk."

"Sit. You will be good for exactly shit at your desk in this mood. Now, talk to me."

The yellow couch sucked Brady down into its broken-springed maw as it did everyone else. He leaned stiffly back against the cushions. "You've known Reyes longer than most of us. Does he have any long-standing enemies?"

"Lots, but not the kind who kidnap him in the dark of night. Professional rivals, disgruntled woo-woo theorists, ex-wives, and every asswipe in the FBI he got promoted over. Luckily, he's also got some backup with impressive creds. And he's got us."

"See, you've got good intel. My snap answer would've been that Stephen Reyes's only known enemy is himself."

"Yeah, I left that one off the list. Come on, lollipop, tell Mama. You think someone's hunting us, don't you?"

He lifted his chin and fixed her with those astonishing blue eyes. *Aquamarines? Blue zircons? He makes me want to head for a jewelry store.* "Peretti," he said, "and now Reyes. And whoever dumped Peretti came all the way from New Jersey for something."

"You think Peretti gave us up."

"I think that's the way to play it."

Hafidha sighed, gathered her braids up behind her head and tugged on them. "I can handle having a target painted on my chest. But I prefer to know it's there."

"Pretend you do. I can't think of any other precaution to take and still get the goddamn job done." He scowled off into the corner of her sanctum. If he'd had laser eyeballs, he'd have burned a hole in the wool of her coat on its hanger. "That and praying."

Hafidha studied his face in profile. "Are we talking one god, a son, something involving a ghost, and Romans seriously over-reacting? You're proposing that as an actual real option."

He shrugged and looked down at his knees. "Not for everyone."

"But for you--?"

She thought, during the long silence, that he wouldn't answer. Fair enough, since it was none of her business. But at last he said, "It's not all snake handlers and talking in tongues and hysterical cures. I like Jesus. I like what he said."

"There are an awful lot of people out there who say they love Jesus and would not love you," Hafidha said. Carefully, but she said it, because hey, it

was the Federal Bureau of *Investigation*, after all.

Brady surprised her with a sideways look and a grin, like a little boy with a firecracker. "Yeah, too bad for them. I figure I'm in there with Samaritans, centurions, and Greek women."

"And Greek men?"

"Funny girl."

He was still smiling, so she said, "You think God will help Reyes if you pray?"

"No, God'll help me handle not having a goddamn thing to do to help Reyes right now."

Suddenly, surprisingly, she was jealous, just a little. "God and I are so not speaking right now."

The smile faded. He pushed out his lower lip thoughtfully and nodded.

Bad Wabbit. No fishing for sympathy. We hate sympathy. "Hey, have you met Rupert Beale?"

"The secret master of Xtreme Profiling? I've heard him lecture at Quantico. And read his textbooks."

"Including *Malfeasance and Miracles*?"

Brady rolled his eyes. "Last time I looked, they were still saying life is short."

"It's a hoot, pumpkin. Especially if you know what we know and read for what he's loudly not saying. Anyway, you may get some face-to-face. Es is asking for authorization to bring him in on this."

Ah, she loved that startle reflex. He said, "Since when do we hire contractors?"

"Sugarplum, Beale's been on our tab for ages. He knows El Supremo. Possibly there's some friendly rivalry there."

"Damn. Well, he knows his stuff on criminal psych. We can use the extra eyes. And if he doesn't think we're batshit, I promise not to think he is, either."

Hafidha dropped her voice to its lowest register and intoned, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Brady rolled his eyes and stood up.

Her system tapped her on the mental shoulder with an alert. "Stay right there," she said, and thought up her mail. "IAFIS."

In a step, he was behind her chair and leaning over her shoulder. Which she hated, but in this case, she could sympathize. "Match?"

"I just kicked it to everyone's e-mail. Go read."

He was out the door before she got to the *D*.

She read it herself. Hope Mitchell. A woman. Fingerprinted while resident in-- *Oh, let's not mince words. An insane asylum.*.

If anyone could talk a crazy woman out of killing him, it was Reyes. If he had the chance.

If he didn't... No, no, no. Now and then she felt the urge to club Stephen Reyes like an adorable baby seal, but that was an exasperation of equals. She appreciated it. She wasn't going to see Reyes bobbing up in the Potomac on her watch, damn it.

She really, really needed to not have anyone die right now.

*

After his usual manner of volunteering (something an old soldier should have had beaten out of him by now), Todd had declared he missed New Mexican food. Falkner, after an inscrutable stare, had ordered him to Albuquerque and the Adler Long-term Care Facility, which had been Hope Mitchell's home thirteen years ago. Now he sat across a desk from Dr. Janet Kennedy, the facility director, a pale, freckled woman in her late fifties, wearing a navy cardigan and a long gray tweed skirt.

He'd called ahead, so he suspected the file under her spread fingers was his quarry's. "What do you want to know about Hope Mitchell?" Kennedy asked, chin lifted.

"Background. She may be involved in an ongoing FBI investigation." Grave, but friendly, to impress her with the importance of this interview without

seeming prepared to steamroller her. He was, of course, but no point in starting out that way.

Kennedy looked down at the file under her hands, thinking, maybe wondering how much harm she might do Mitchell by talking or keeping silent. "You know she was questioned by the police while she was here."

Sol nodded. "She was suspected in the death of an orderly in 1984."

"Can you tell me what you're investigating?"

"A case involving the murder of a federal agent and the kidnapping of another. Ms. Mitchell's fingerprints were on the missing agent's car."

Kennedy reached for her reading glasses, unfolded them, and put them down again. "Poor girl."

"Why 'poor girl,' Dr. Kennedy?"

Kennedy pushed back from the desk, rose, and walked to the window. She had a nice view: a stand of pines, a distant mountain topped with snow. "It would be unprofessional to describe this place, circa 1984, as a hellhole. I was doing my psychiatric residency here."

It probably was unprofessional. Todd liked her better for it. It was the kind of character detail he'd include to ensure reader sympathy. "What was Hope Mitchell diagnosed as?"

"Autistic. In light of what we know now about autism, her symptoms aren't a good fit. But we're still reluctant to diagnose schizophrenia in very young patients. And there was almost certainly physical abuse before she came here."

"You remember her?"

"I was her therapist during her last years here." Kennedy returned to the desk chair and sat, as if resigned to the inevitable. She pushed the file across her desk toward him.

"Thank you," he said. She didn't smile or speak.

He consulted the sheets at the front of the packet, the documents from Mitchell's intake assessment; then he thumbed through. Therapists' reports,

activities, medical evaluations, and finally, Mitchell's discharge docs. "She was released in 1995."

"To a board and care facility. She was able to get a part-time job, care for herself and her belongings, save some money. She was on medication, of course. Eventually she was approved for independent living."

"Did you have any doubts about that?"

"I didn't."

"You say that as if someone else did."

"One of the doctors felt that on the basis of her interests, she was delusional. That seemed a strange basis for suggesting someone wasn't fit for release, when there are people in the world who hold jobs and pay mortgages who don't believe in the moon landings."

Todd blinked at the heat in Kennedy's words. Long-standing disagreement, from the sound of it. "What was Hope Mitchell's interest?"

Kennedy opened her mouth and closed it again, and frowned over his shoulder. "She believed... She talked about people living among us who were...enhanced."

"Aliens?"

Kennedy misread his confusion as disbelief. "Agent Todd, I don't make judgments about my patients' worldviews. Only their mental health. Believing in aliens or angels or unicorns doesn't by itself interfere with leading a normal life."

Todd breathed deep. Kennedy was fighting a battle she'd had many times before; never mind that she didn't need to have it with him. He'd lived amicably with people who believed weirder things than Kennedy's list. He nodded and sat forward in his chair, imagining sitting with this woman around a campfire telling stories about their personal Abominable Snowmen. "Like my job, in a way. I try not to judge worldviews *or* mental health. All I can determine is whether someone's actions broke a law. Anything else is bias."

Kennedy studied him, narrow-eyed. He must have looked harmless. She folded her hands before her and said, "Hope believed that humans could be

made smarter or stronger by science. That experiments had been done, and that the results were living secretly among normal humans." She met his eyes and shrugged. "It boiled down to something like eugenics, and heaven knows she's not alone in that one."

"Did she believe she might be one of them?" Todd asked gently.

Kennedy shrugged. "Children want to know why they're different. Can you blame them for preferring to believe they're special rather than accepting that they're broken?"

No, he couldn't blame anyone for that. Sol re-read the summary sheet in Mitchell's file. "The matter of the orderly's death was dropped. Why was that?"

Kennedy snorted. "Have you ever seen a locked-ward orderly, Agent Todd? They're like professional wrestlers, only bigger."

"It doesn't seem to have helped him. This says his neck was broken."

"Exactly. Whatever provocation she might have had, Hope Mitchell didn't kill anyone. She was four feet tall and weighed eighty pounds. She was a ten-year-old girl."

It was ridiculous, so of course the investigation was dropped. Then why had it been started at all? *Sherlock Holmes was right, about the impossible and the improbable. And they may look alike, but they're two different animals.*

He thought about a small, hand-shaped hole punched in the front grille of a black Cadillac. The first victim tells you the most. "What was the orderly like? Did he get along with the patients?"

"He...often undermined treatment plans."

"Meaning?"

Kennedy sighed and looked down at her fingers. Of course; she'd been here, finishing her residency. If the hospital had overlooked patient abuse, she should have reported it. *Easy for a medical board to say.* "He ridiculed the younger, weaker patients. Gave them offensive names. When they had difficulty with daily tasks, he assumed they were opposing his authority. Like many people with self-esteem issues, he belittled others as a defense."

"'What makes you so special?'" Todd murmured.

"Just so. He should have been fired, but as I said, this was a badly-run facility in 1984."

So instead of getting fired, he got murdered. And Hope Mitchell had an answer if anyone asked what made her special.

Act V

Reyes leaned against the cold brick chimney, partly for support, partly so the woman could not circle around him. He sat cross-legged, because his outstretched legs might be too tempting a target for a kick.

But his captor seemed not to be in a kicking mood this--evening? Morning? He'd lost track. She sat relaxed in the dinette chair. The part of his mind that always watched from a distance saw a weirdly domestic little scene, with the sound off, at least, and ignoring the cord around his wrists. He was winning her over.

He would have tried to work the knot loose with his broken teeth by now, but she rarely left the attic any more. And given her strength and speed, he wondered if having his hands free would make a difference. The ringing in his head and the spottiness of his memories made it hard to be sure, but in the parking lot, he didn't think he'd even heard her slipping up behind him.

He rested his head against the chimney. It would be nice to sleep. Terrible idea. His skin chafed under the cord, and he thought of Chaz. *Believe me, the irony is not lost on me,* he said to the memory of Villette's closed face.

She said, "You keep track of the experiment subjects, don't you? Do you know where they all are?"

"Experiment--"

"The changed ones. The next generation. Is the government holding them prisoner, the ones you've found?"

Yes. And we're doing terrible experiments on them. Because it's the only way we can think of to try to save them from the hell you live in. Not that that's an excuse."I'm not sure."

"What does that mean, you're not sure? How sure do you have to be before you can say, 'I know?'"

That was the question, wasn't it? When would he know enough about what he was chasing to be able to say, "I know?"

He shifted his rear on the hard floor. "I'm not sure what you're asking. May I stand? Do you mind?"

"Do whatever you want, Steve. Except try to get out the door."

He stood, took a few stiff steps away, and raised his bound hands to rub his face. He hit a span of abraded skin and winced. His cheeks felt like liquor-soaked pound cake, squishy and swollen. "Why are you interested in experiments?"

"Why are you? You volunteered for your job." When he didn't answer: "You know where to find them. Don't you? The other FBI guy said you keep them locked up somewhere. Was he lying? Do you just kill them as you find them?

Reyes kept her in his peripheral vision. On the left side. His right eye was close to swelling shut. She looked serious, intent. *Volunteer information. We're on the same team, you and I. Believe it. Stay there.* "No. We don't want anyone to die. We're trying to find a cure for the ones who are sick. The ones who can't control what they do. That's all."

"He said you had changed ones on your team. Using them like dogs to catch the rest of us. Your cure is brainwashing, Steve. Isn't it?"

Jesus and Mary. It's the fucking X-Men. Her mythology was the same as his. "They help because they want to help," he said. "They want to help other people like them. We're the good guys."

He wished he knew her name. It would be so much more effective if he knew her name.

She rose, lifted the chair in one hand, and advanced on Reyes. She held the chair out in front of her, legs first, like a lion tamer.

He caught the edge of the seat, but she pressed forward, pushing him against the wall, pinning him between the chair legs. Still she pushed toward him. With a metallic groan the chrome tubing of the chair back crumpled and folded, the chrome legs bowed. She pushed until she was face-to-face with Reyes, the wrecked chair pinched between them.

"When the government finds them, do they kill them?" Her voice was too loud for the little distance from her mouth to his ears. Her breath was hot on his bruised skin. "Is that your job? Protecting your kind from my kind?"

"We're police officers. We investigate criminal activity. If we can help the people we find--"

She leaned closer. Spittle struck his cheek. "Help. Right. I've read *1984*. *V for Vendetta*. I know words lie."

He'd bet his life she'd been institutionalized. He *was* betting his life. "I'm telling you the truth. We only want to help. We don't just lock people away."

She lurched backward and threw the chair at his head. He raised his arms and ducked; the blow shoved his forearms into his face. The pain made him wobble, sent him staggering back into the wall, spitting the blood from fragile, broken scabs.

Her voice rose to a shriek. "I'm not walking into your trap! You have answers alive in your own Guantanamo! What are you *breeding* in there, Steve? If you're the good guys, who the hell do you work for?"

He pressed back against the wall, panting, longing to shut his eyes but knowing better. "I have questions. Some of them are the same as yours. But I have so few answers. I don't know what causes the--what causes your people's difference. My superiors won't let me talk about you. If I could...maybe I--we could learn more."

She watched him, her eyes narrow and hard. "You really don't know."

"I know you're hungry all the time. You eat twice as much as anyone you know, but you lose weight. You know you're stronger than most people. You want to know why. So do I."

"What happens to the ones you've caught?"

The truth was complex. He could lie. Couldn't he? He'd been a good liar in a good cause, but his skills were dried up. "It depends. On the host--the person. Some go free. Some--" *Don't say "of them," Stephen.* "--only want to kill. They don't see beyond that. For the others, it's like a college." *Right. Xavier's School for Gamma Youngsters.* He closed his eyes after all; they felt scorched and sanded. "We teach each other."

"Like a college. You mean like a hospital."

Crap. Divert her. "The food's better." He wondered where the strength to make jokes was coming from.

"Where you learn."

"It's not like a hospital."

"By shocking them and injecting them and cutting out pieces of their brain."

"No!" But her flat, relentless voice made it sound normal and inevitable. He added, "No. I've been there. I can tell you--"

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. You were supposed to know everything. But you're just one of the *tools*."

He didn't see her cross the space between them. Fast, yes. Insanely fast. Her hands were around his neck, her features twisted with rage. He swung his fists up to shove her, and kicked her in the stomach.

She stumbled backward, more surprised than hurt.

Reyes shouted, "If you kill me, you get nothing!" His voice came out rough from his aching throat.

If she'd wanted to kill him, he'd be dead, windpipe crushed, spine snapped.

She rubbed her ribs absently where his blow landed, then smiled. "Maybe you know more about your bosses' business than you think, Steve. I'll find out. I always do." She picked up the ruined chair and turned toward the door.

No. Keep her here.. The still small voice of his training and experience, telling him to regain control when everything animal in him screamed for her to leave, to let him huddle and bleed in peace. His mouth full of blood, Reyes called after her, "Most people call me Stephen."

She turned back, hesitating. He spat out a clot and said again, "Most people call me Stephen. Not Steve."

Her nod was slow. "You see? I didn't know that. Now I do."

"What do they call you?"

She blinked. She was thinking about the answer, hard. At last she said, "You little bitch. Freak. Not my friend. Batty. God."

He winced. Yes. He remembered calling her that.

"I'll be back," she said. She slung the ruined chair over her shoulder and went out the door. As she left, she was humming again, a familiar rhythm and an alien tune.

He heard the lock turn, and her steps on the stairs.

He wanted to pace. But his strength was limited, so he had to be sensible about using it. Knowledge, reason, self-control would get him through this. He could go to the window and look out, though; that was reasonable.

The dense gray winter sky hid the clues; he still couldn't tell what time it was. He clutched one of the bars, pulled on it to test it. He shook it. Then another, and another, with more force, with all his strength, fighting the urge to scream for help or just to scream.

Exhaustion stopped him eventually, and left him gripping the last bar so hard he quaked. He let go and slammed his bound fists against the window frame. *Very smart, Stephen. Break a bone in your hand, why don't you.* He wouldn't do that. *He* wasn't brave enough to break his own bones trying to free himself.

He was too tired to lie down. He pressed his face into his upraised arms and leaned into the bars. Cold metal cooled his abused face. If he lived, he'd have scars.

*

From the looks of it, Martha Bell ran Adobe Air Courier with the precision of a military supply depot. The hangar-like metal pole barn on the outskirts of Prescott, Arizona served as both processing center and manager's office, and the one was so perfectly organized there should have been labels on the desk drawers of the other.

Todd craned his neck to be sure.

Bell hunched over the keyboard of an old HP desktop computer on the front counter, typing hunt-and-peck. She was in her forties, with a cowboy complexion: lined heavy around her mouth and gray eyes, tan as a saddle, early age spots mottling the backs of her hands.

"Hope Mitchell--yep, she worked here '96 to '98. Voluntary quit. She had family she wanted to see in Tulsa."

"Tulsa?" Mitchell's mother had died of liver cancer in Oregon in 1989; her stepfather had gone to work for an Alaskan mining outfit, and even Todd couldn't find a current address for him. As the only child of two only children, Mitchell was a little short of near relatives.

"I sent a letter of recommendation to an express service for her. Don't know if they hired her. She wasn't quite right, you know--" Bell gave her left temple a tap with one finger, "--but she worked like a draft mule. Never slowed down."

A stocky twenty-something man worked a hand forklift under a pallet beside the counter. His hair was so short it was only a shadow on the brick-colored skin of his scalp. He had an eagle tattooed on the back of his neck, half-visible above the edge of his t-shirt, and his face and posture were focused and intense, like a cat watching a bird through a window. He watched Bell and Todd without meeting their eyes.

"Got the name of the service in Tulsa?" Todd asked.

The man with the forklift said, "Martha? You talking about Hope?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Yeah." To Sol, she added, "This is Harry Fish. Harry, Agent Todd."

Todd said, "You knew Hope Mitchell? Do you know where she is?"

"No." Fish looked at Todd's shoes. "But I want to find her, her address."

"Why?"

"She lent me some stuff to read. She might want it back."

"What kind of stuff, Mr. Fish?"

"Non-fiction. I don't read stuff that isn't real."

"Do you remember the titles?"

Fish looked up, frowning, so surprised he looked at Todd's face before he jerked his chin down again. "Why?"

"It could help me find her. This may be a life or death situation, Mr. Fish."

Fish's shoulders jerked, as if his whole taut body had been plucked like a string. "She said that. Before she left. Life or death." He hurried over to a row of half-a-dozen old school lockers and opened one.

Martha Bell looked up from her computer terminal. "Mister--Agent Todd. I sent that letter to Donning Express Parcel in Tulsa."

Harry returned with two beat-up paperbacks and a newsletter. Todd read the titles of the paperbacks: *We Are Not Alone* and *Genome: the Secret Agenda*. The newsletter was an old copy of *America Watches*, creased from being mailed folded in half.

Todd took the newsletter and turned it over. There was a torn spot on the back where the mailing label had been pulled off.

Nice try, child, he thought, rubbing his thumb over the rough patch on the paper. *But you're playing the big kids now.*

They would find her, and they would do it in time. There was no point in telling himself anything else.

*

Reyes alternated between walking slowly around the room and leaning against a wall. If he sat down, he nodded off, and the woman hit him. He didn't think she objected to him sleeping; if he could have kept up his half of the conversation while he dozed, she might have let him do it.

The woman walked with him. He was too tired to tell if she was following him or driving him. "Don't be stupid," she said, and he realized with a jab of fear that she was replying to something he'd said that he couldn't remember. "Do you think they'd let you near the secrets if you weren't under their control?"

"If someone were hiding things from me, there would be places I wouldn't be allowed to go."

"You haven't found the doors they won't let you through."

He was so impossibly tired. So thirsty. His voice was a kind of mechanical whisper. *Stay with it. The team is coming. Keep her interested. Stay alive.* If he were Solomon Todd, he'd spin her a story that would convince her they were on the same side. That this was a Hong Kong cop-and-criminal buddy flick, and they were going to take on the corrupt government all on their own.

The photocopied articles. She might deny it when he offered help, but that's because he was offering help on the wrong terms. As an authority figure. She

was looking for allies. He just had to come to her as a supplicant. As a convert, willing to repent and make good on his sins.

Reyes softened his voice, made it questioning, and said, "Do you really think so?"

The change in her was almost instantaneous. She leaned forward, her expression electric. "There's no other way it can work. You think you're helping the changed ones live in a safe place. How long do you think you'd stay alive if you came close to the truth? You have a dangerous job. You could die at it. You could go deposit your paycheck and get shot in a bank robbery. If you're alive, they want you alive. Because you serve them."

Reyes nodded, though it made the room spin. It was hard to approximate open body language with your hands tied. "A...a friend of mine says paranoia is what you get when your intuition has to run on automatic." Not stretching things too much to call him a friend. Better not to talk about teammates. To say the kinds of things Peretti must have said to her, that got Reyes into this attic. *No offense, my ass, Peretti.*

"He's smarter than you."

Who? Oh, yes. Todd. The room was still spinning. Maybe his brain *was* swelling up in there. It would be fitting if that was the thing that killed him, after all the trouble it had gotten him into over the years. Clara could fend for herself: he had trusted her, way back when, and look where that had got him. But there were other people he owed apologies. *Sorry, Kay. Sorry, Vivian. Sorry, Delphine. I'm sorry you're going to have to find out I'm dead from the news, because I never even bothered to tell Todd I was dating somebody.* No, not bothered. *Trusted.*

He dragged himself away from reading his obituary. Focus on now. "I'm not claiming to be smart. Maybe I'm not as smart as you."

"You're not smart enough. Nobody's smarter than they are but us."

There was a different tone in her voice, something confidential and conspiratorial. Not like when she talked about her fellow supervillains. Trembling with the need to sound casual, Reyes asked, "Who's 'us?'"

She stepped back. For the first time, he saw fear and suspicion on her face.

It woke him up. A short-lived burst of adrenaline, but he'd take what he got. *Get back inside the schizophrenic delusion.* "I told you, I want these answers, too. How can I help if I don't know as much as you do?"

"No. I tell you everything I know, and you lie. You let them cut into my brain. That's how it works. I know."

"I haven't lied to you. I wouldn't lie to you any more than you would lie to me. I need your help. I need to understand how they're using me."

"You're not worth lying to." Her voice quivered with fear. She wasn't scared of Reyes; who was she scared of? As if he'd spoken his thoughts aloud, she lunged at him. "Shut up!" She backhanded him. It bounced his head off the wall, and he slumped to his knees in a haze of vertigo. "I'm asking the questions!"

He tasted blood across his tongue. He swallowed and croaked, "If you hit me, I can't answer."

"You're trying to make me angry. So I'll kill you and keep your secrets for you."

His vision wobbled. A shard of tooth worked loose: he spat it, and more blood, on the floor. The blood just made him thirstier. His nose must be swollen shut, because he couldn't smell piss anymore. "You got the wrong guy. Just as you did when you took Peretti. You can't change that by killing me. You can only lose my help. I need your help, and you need... you need mine."

Beyond her ankles, Reyes saw his toothbrush, the one she'd taunted him with and thrown aside. It lay in the corner, half hidden behind a wall stud. So absurd, the sight of his toothbrush in this place. It violated the dramatic unities. It had escaped from a comedy. It was wasted here.

Suddenly she laughed and squatted in front of him. "Aren't you supposed to be careful what you say? So I'll stay calm?"

He probably shouldn't have talked about what came after killing him. It might make the visualization more concrete. "Do you think that would work?"

She dabbed blood off his mouth with the hem of his t-shirt, then whisked her fingers over his hair, maybe to brush out dust. Her fingers swept the dried-

blood gash in his forehead where she'd banged his head on the engine block, and he flinched. "Shrinks don't believe in the changed ones," she said. "'Delusional,' it's called."

"I believe in you," he rasped. So much easier to lie down, let her kill him. Let himself die. But the team was coming. He trusted them. He chose to trust. "Why do you believe?"

"Because it explains everything."

"Like what?"

She smiled. "Like why your kind is doomed. Say hi to the dodo for me."

*

America Watches was published out of what Nikki Lau was pretty sure was an illegal garage conversion on a split-level in a development on the fringes of Atlanta. L. Pearce Nelson, Jr., who sat behind the scratch-and-dent steel desk in that former garage, didn't strike her as the sort of person who bothered with building permits or code inspections.

The office smelled faintly of mildew, and was crowded with old office furniture, out-of-date computers, a budget-brand laser printer, a fax machine, and a tabletop copier. Articles, notes, and photos were tacked on the unpainted drywall. Beside her she saw a page torn from an issue of *Newsweek*, an article about climate change, with marginalia in red. She wondered who the writer in red ink thought was really behind global warming.

Behind Nelson's desk, a big American flag was stretched and tacked on the wall with pushpins. Lau suspected that, like the garage conversion, that method of flag display wasn't an approved one.

She smiled and offered her ID. "Special Agent Nicolette Lau, FBI. Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Nelson."

Nelson hadn't looked up since he buzzed her in the door; he pretended to be reading the copy in front of him. "No problem. Anything else before you leave the premises?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You wanted me to see you. I saw you. So leave."

Permission to treat the witness as hostile, Your Honor? Lau nodded, as if Nelson had said something perfectly reasonable. "Mr. Nelson, I'm investigating the disappearance of a federal agent. One of your subscribers may be involved."

"Well, good for him."

"I don't think you understand--"

"Yeah, I do, Agent. You want to get your hands on my records. Well, go call one of your bought judges and get a subpoena, and I'll let you talk to my lawyer about it."

Lau hid the clenching of her fingers in the fabric of her jacket. "Mr. Nelson. There may be more than one life at stake."

Nelson shrugged with his shoulders and mouth at once. "I don't know any federal agents, or any other un-American bastards, for that matter. So excuse me if I don't give a damn when some government flunky sticks his--or her--nose where it's not wanted and gets it cut off." He gathered up the papers on his desk and tapped them upright against the surface to straighten the edges of the pile. "There's the door. I'd hold it open for you, but I hear you career women think that's an insult."

She'd had plenty of practice smiling when provoked. She gave Nelson the one that meant, *I'm smiling because you have no idea how dead you'd be if I weren't in a hurry.* "That's very considerate of you, Mr. Nelson. Have a nice day."

As Lau walked down the driveway to her rental car, she slid her phone out of her jacket pocket and dialed Hafidha.

*

Falkner watched the faces in the room as Chaz told them what the team knew about Hope Mitchell. It was a useful distraction; it kept her from dwelling on how much they *didn't* know.

Victor Celentano leaned back in his desk chair, a frown pulling his features down like a pendulum weight. The pink undertone seemed to have migrated out of his skin and been translated into bloodshot eyes. He stared at Chaz; Chaz was being decent about it and not staring back.

Rupert Beale looked comfortable in one of Celentano's white chairs. Falkner wondered if he was. His law enforcement career had been ended by a shattered pelvis, which was the sort of thing that resulted in a lifelong inability to sit through entire meetings and dinners. But he'd entered the room with only a slight limp, and no cane.

She couldn't help contrasting him with Reyes. Stephen was relentlessly, consciously sleek, always perfectly groomed and dressed. Beale's bits and bobs of untidiness and apparent inattention to his appearance seemed equally conscious. His salt-and-pepper hair stuck out in wisps over his collar; the long, blunt fingers that curled over the chair arms ended in ragged nails; the knot of his tie was crooked. A venti Starbucks something-or-other sat on the floor beside him. He looked perfectly professorial. Given his grasp of what people saw and how they saw it, and what they thought and did on the basis of it, it was a good bet none of those things were accidental.

Which meant he was very like Reyes, after all.

"A county sheriff's deputy died under mysterious circumstances near Prescott in 1998, during Hope Mitchell's residence," Chaz was saying. "The body of a Federal marshal was found in Tulsa in March of 2000, shortly after she left there.

"The deputy had been first responder to an anomalous crime a mile north of the U.S.-Mexican border near Nogales. We haven't found a connection between the Tulsa victim and an anomalous incident. But we believe Hope Mitchell targeted Reyes through information she got from Larry Peretti, because of Reyes's involvement in the ACTF."

Celentano pressed his palms together under his chin. "You think Peretti would've put another agent at risk?"

"You've seen the photos," Falkner answered, because she could say to Celentano what Chaz wanted to say, and shouldn't. "He looked as if he'd been attacked by a trash compactor. Under those circumstances, I'd answer anything I was asked. Torture is a very effective means of getting people to say what you want them to say, whether it's true or not."

It was Beale who leaned forward and asked Chaz, "Have you placed Mitchell in the Washington area?" When he spoke, his epic eyebrows lifted and fell. He had a pleasant, slightly-rusty voice and the crisp elocution

necessary to make himself understood all the way to the back of a university lecture hall. It was almost a shame he didn't do interviews.

"She started as a part-time driver for Globe Express last Monday. She didn't show up for work on Thursday afternoon, and hasn't reported in since. The address they had for her turns out to be a dry cleaners." Chaz pulled his shoulders up a little and cleared his throat. "The office manager was surprised that she hadn't called in. Mitchell's performance was excellent until last week, and she was hired with a string of recommendations from previous employers."

Falkner's stomach grew a good-sized lead brick. "She's stayed in control of her daily life until now. She thinks she doesn't need to do that anymore."

Beale caught her eye. It wasn't a sympathetic look, exactly, but Falkner was grateful for the comprehension in it even as she wondered how much she'd given away.

Celentano turned to Falkner. "We have the detailed autopsy on Agent Peretti?"

"Yes, sir. In the water at least 48 hours. Cause of death, cranial fractures, right and left hemispheres. Multiple secondary fractures, contusions, no evidence of the instrument used. The water took care of anything else, except for a thorn found in one of his shoelaces. It's from a rugosa rose, possibly a wild variety." She raised her eyes from the report. "Apparently someone in forensics is big on roses."

Celentano said, "Which may be lucky for Agent Reyes. A--Doctor Beale, can you add anything so far?"

Beale shook his head. "Your team is on top of the evidence. And if anyone on the planet can handle himself in this situation, it's Stephen Reyes." Falkner saw Beale's gaze shift to Chaz, but he didn't say what he was thinking. She added four more points to his people-reading score. Chaz didn't need to hear that last year's ordeal had been observed and discussed by strangers. "Mitchell's manifestation is unsubtle and oddly uncomplicated, from what we know. It appears she's simply more than human. Stronger, faster, better, more. She was capable of punching through the grille of an automobile without apparent harm to her hand, and capable of overpowering a trained, fit, vigilant federal agent with a blitz attack, effectively enough to

leave no sign of struggle. Based on Special Agent Todd's report, she manifested early--by age ten at the latest--and she has used her powers to kill almost from the start. If her special abilities extend to her senses as well as her musculo-skeletal structure, she may be difficult to apprehend."

This time it was Chaz's eye Falkner caught; his look said, only for her, *No shit.*

"If she can be lured away from wherever she's dug herself in, away from Reyes, we have the best chance of taking her alive with no harm to her hostage. But her apparent schizophrenia--Agent Falkner, you agree with me on that supposition? Thank you--is likely to make her suspicious of any attempt to move her out of what she considers safe space. If she believes she's being forced out, she will make it a priority to hide her trail and eliminate witnesses."

"She'll kill the hostage."

Beale looked apologetic; whether for the message or the roundabout delivery of it, Falkner wasn't sure.

"What's our next move?" Celentano asked her.

"Agents Lau and Gates are pursuing a line of inquiry," she answered blandly.

So she got a third wordless exchange, this time with Celentano. Because he knew when she put it that way, it was better he didn't know the details.

He stood, announcing the meeting was done. Falkner, Beale--stiffly--and Chaz followed his lead. "All right, people. Bring him back. Whatever it takes."

That was Hope Mitchell's death sentence, pronounced in case of need. Falkner hoped they wouldn't require it. Or wish they did.

In the hall outside Celentano's office, Beale said, "I'm sorry for the occasion, but I'm glad to have met you both. Reyes isn't stingy with praise for your work."

Chaz gave him a grave and decorous nod. *I should remember to tell Bekk about that, the next time she declares that the only good reaction is a brutally honest one.* "Thank you, Mr. Beale. We appreciate any help you can give us."

Beale looked at the floor for a moment, gathering thoughts, most likely. They were of a height, so when he lifted his head again she had a good view of slightly up-tilted brown eyes and a crooked, short nose. "The information you've gathered about Hope Mitchell suggests she's highly intelligent. But the simplicity of her manifestation might indicate limited creative intelligence."

"You mean, she's a brute-force type." Falkner didn't know why Beale's careful academic periods made her want to translate him into Master Sergeant. Certainly not for Chaz's sake.

Chaz cleared his throat again. "That's not very comforting."

"But Agent Reyes is very creative indeed," Beale said quickly, turning to Chaz. "Like you. If he can put it to good use, as you did, there's an excellent chance we'll find him alive."

Chaz's face changed color several times, which was easy to see under his winter plumage. It settled at flushed. His expression and posture were stiff when he said to Falkner, "I'll go see how Hafs is doing." He spun on one heel and half-loped down the hall.

Beale looked stricken enough that Falkner's reflexive irritation faded. "I'm sorry," Beale said. "I shouldn't have brought it up. Of course he's still raw there."

Falkner found she liked him better in his less-perfect form. "It's like a recovering alcoholic spotting a Jack Daniels billboard. It's going to happen sometimes."

"Well, I'm sorry, but don't tell him so. It'll only make him self-conscious."

Falkner smiled, and hoped he spotted it. "You know where we are. If you have any insights, we want 'em."

*

Reyes was too dizzy to stand and too stubborn to lie down. He knelt instead, his elbows on the floor and his head cushioned on his forearms. He dozed and dreamed of pillow-top mattresses and clean sheets.

When he woke, he thought, *Nice to know what my mysterious unconscious thinks is important.*

If he were his captor, he could wrench the bars off the windows, or yank one of the shutters off its hinges and use it as a bludgeon. He could prise the bolts out of the work table with his fingernails and swing one of the legs like a baseball bat. But the attic was otherwise empty and swept bare.

Except for his toothbrush.

Well, one never knew. He crawled across the splintery floor to the corner where he'd seen it. Still there. She'd forgotten it. Because really, what could anyone do with a toothbrush?

He heard her tread on the staircase to the first floor. (The stairs he'd been on when she dropped the balustrade on him. He'd like to see those stairs again. What with the circumstances, he didn't remember them very well.)

As she climbed the narrow stairs to the attic, he heard her humming. What was that song? He could almost work it out. The woman couldn't carry a tune, but she got the rhythm right often enough that it tickled something in Reyes's memory.

He tucked the toothbrush into the waistband of his sweatpants and pulled his t-shirt down to hide it.

*

"So L. Pearce Nelson is a sexist jerk who gets his rocks off interfering with a federal officer doing her duty. Besides being a crappy speller and a worse page designer."

In Hafidha's Bluetooth headset, Lau said, "That sounded kind of like a list."

"I like to have a list. It strengthens my resolve when the time comes to do something I'm not supposed to do in the service of the things I *am* supposed to do." Hafidha slid down in her chair and propped her red patent leather boots on the desk beside her monitor.

"Ah." The pause was short, but even Wonder Woman needed a little time to process a sentence like that. "So you're strengthening your resolve?"

"Good dog, no, sweetness. I did that minutes ago. I just have the list left over afterward."

"Does that mean--"

"--I have the complete downloaded subscriber database of *America* freakin' *Watches* here on my screen." She brought it to the top, so she wouldn't be lying. "You know, I bet a lot of these people would be very, very sorry for the world to know they pay money to get a right-wing nutbar conspiracy flake newsletter."

"Blackmail 'em after we get the boss back, all right? Is she--"

Hafidha rolled right over her, which was just fine. "Hey, holy shit. Guess who I found under C?"

"That thing we don't believe in?"

"Dyson fucking Cieslewicz. Eddie's brother."

Hafidha pictured Lau hugging herself in the silence that followed. *Bullets and bracelets, lady. Be strong.*

Lau's voice sounded tight. "You cope however you can."

Hafidha nodded slowly, beads clinking. "Hope Mitchell rents post office box 2825 at Mall Station in Fredericksburg."

This pause was longer. "Shit. God damn it. Okay, beats the hell out of nothing. You need all kinds of ID for a PO box. Maybe some of it will be useful. You'll give that to Mom and tell her I'm on my way back?"

"Even before I send this anonymous tip to the IRS about Nelson's undeclared donations?"

"...You're kidding, right?"

"Of course I am, cupcake. Gates out." She broke the connection, and murmured, "I can do way better than that."

*

Reyes lifted his face off his forearms. The pressure made his mouth--not hurt less, exactly. But somehow it made the pain more bearable. He still couldn't shake the feeling that his head had ditched his body and was making its escape down a washboarded gravel road.

"You people need too much sleep," his captor's voice whispered--her unmodulated whisper, which was more like a bark. It wasn't until she let go that he realized she'd gripped his scalp with her splayed fingers and shaken

him like a dog with a chew toy. Playfully. She was being... playful. "One of your weaknesses. This is for another one."

She dropped something beside him. It clinked. He sat up and lifted it. Cold. Ice in a plastic bag, wrapped inside a white terrycloth towel. He weighed it in his hands a moment, trying to decide where to press it first.

"What are the rest?"

"You're not strong enough, or fast enough, or smart enough."

"That's true. Then why haven't the...the changed ones taken over?"

His jaw, he decided. He laid the ice pack alongside his face. It was marginally better than any of his three wedding nights.

She hunkered down, arms wrapped, hands on her elbows. "How should I know? Maybe they will. You'll be glad you helped me then. I'll be able to protect you."

"They haven't told you their plan?"

"They left me to be born. They were coming back for me. But you people found them first, so they didn't come back. There was nobody to rescue me from..." Her affectless voice stopped abruptly.

Reyes swallowed. He laid the ice pack across his knees, trying not to see the bright and dark blood on the towelling, and fished inside it for an ice cube. He slipped it into his mouth and spoke around it. "Left you to be born?"

Her face grew dreamy and far away. "Momma said my father was a beautiful man who came out of a bright light. She fell in love with him by magic. Next thing she knew, she was pregnant. I was always special. I always knew I wasn't like other people."

"Then it wasn't your mother's choice to have you?"

She stood like somebody had jerked her strings. "You know all about that. You work for the ones who did the Tuskegee Experiments. Gave LSD to people without telling them. Lied about the Gulf of Tonkin. And that's just what you're willing to admit. What other experiments are there? Are there mass graves next to your secret prison? Do you know where the bodies are buried, Stephen Reyes?"

"I don't work for them any more. I work for you now. You helped me. You rescued me from them. You showed me the truth."

"You hate and fear the changed ones. That's how it always is. I've heard all about it. You steal us and kill us and lock us away, and that's why no one came for me." She stepped away from him. "I always knew what I am. I was born knowing."

"You said your mother was--was human."

"He was a monster, black dressed in leather, she was a princess--" Even taking into account her machine-gun verbal style, that sentence ended like a drop off a cliff. Her eyes cut quickly to either side, and she shook her head. "She wasn't my real mother. She was a surrogate. An incubator. But she was good to me. She was made to think I was hers. So she'd take care of me."

"Your kind, is that what they do? They prey on my kind?" He'd put it in her terms, thought of it as she did, without deciding to. Her kind and his kind. That shocked him, like walking into a wall of glass. *Her mythology, not mine.* But hers fit the facts as well as his. Didn't it?

"It's a war between the future and the past. You're a prisoner of war."

"Then so are you."

She stood frozen for a moment in the face of this idea.

He used it. "I can help you. We can work together. I know where they're keeping the prisoners. I have the codes to get in. Will you do that with me?"

She shook her head. "I do what I have to."

"Do you have to kill me?"

She paused again, and spoke slower when she said, "That's what happens to war criminals." She didn't seem to relish the thought.

Act VI

The map of the DC area on the briefing room monitor was marked with a circle. Falkner nodded at it, though she knew everyone in the room was looking already.

"The circle represents approximately a one-hour radius from the Fredericksburg Mall Station where Hope Mitchell has her post office box. Even if it's on the way to work, she's not likely to travel more than an hour to get the mail. But as you can see, that's a hell of a search area."

"Even sticking to the serial killer home-buyer's guide," Hafidha said. "Isolation, privacy, security, space, access, and evidence disposal."

Brady, Worth, Chaz, and Todd swiveled to stare at her.

Hafidha stared back. "Just because he's *our* victim doesn't change the facts, kids."

"She's right," Falkner told them. "Don't make this personal and lose perspective. We need to narrow the search, or work it differently."

"Stake out the post office," Brady suggested.

Todd nodded. "Undercover's there now. But she might only come in once a week."

Worth said, "What about her vehicle? Still no report of a strange car in the alley or the parking lot?"

"Zero," Chaz replied. "And since it's probably a van or something else large and easy to load and unload, that's kind of unexpected. She may be strong, but you can't walk down the street with an unconscious guy over your shoulder, even at that hour, and expect nobody to notice. She had to be parked practically next to him."

Brady said, "All right, do-overs. They're in the parking lot, she's knocked him out, she closes the hood of the car--because leaving it up would draw attention to it."

Falkner thought through his scenario step by step. "No. She puts the fuel pump relay back first. *Then* she closes--"

"Why?" Chaz burst out. "Why did it matter if the fuel pump worked? The grille's broken. As soon as the car's found, we're going to figure out--"

Because the car wouldn't start without it. Because the car had to run.

"God *damn*."

Chaz said, "What?"

"Worth, call Evidence and make sure no one's touched Reyes's car. Then get them to vacuum the hell out of it to find out where it's been. Get samples off the wheel wells and tires."

"She kept her vehicle away from the scene and free of evidence, and reduced the chances of being spotted." Todd's voice was dreamy, pulled out of here and now by the visualization in his head.

Worth was already on her phone. It was Brady who summed up for all of them: "She took him in his own car."

Chaz lunged for the laptop that was serving as their projector. He stared into space, eyes scrolling as they did when he was rereading the text that lived in his head. A moment later, he started typing feverishly. A second circle, partially overlapping the first, appeared on the map. Chaz raised his hand and pointed. "The blue circle is a 90-minute radius from where Reyes' car was recovered. That's an estimate based on the time difference between when he returned the videos, and when witnesses again place his car at the scene. The overlap is our target zone."

*

Why is it, when you get a song stuck in your head, it's almost always one you don't like much? If he was going to have to listen to The Doors on his inner jukebox, he'd rather it wasn't "Break On Through."

He sat on the floor, his back to the wall, because it was a position she seemed to approve of. The toothbrush dug into his belly and thigh, but at least he knew it wasn't slipping free to clatter on the planks at the worst possible moment.

She crouched in front of him, just beyond his outstretched legs.

"Why did you chase after us so hard?" she asked. "Have you ever asked yourself why?"

"Because no one else was doing it."

She laughed. "Anti-lemming. Nobody was running for the cliff, so you jumped off."

Villette would tell her lemmings didn't actually do that. What would happen if Reyes said it?

She stood and walked around the attic, restless, touching the walls in some pattern that must have made sense to her. And she hummed. *dum dum de-um dum dum dah. dee dum dum de-um dum dum dah.* Three notes, but the intervals changed as she moved between them, because she really couldn't carry a tune if she used both hands--

It was "Riders on the Storm." The second verse, the killer on the road one, which wasn't comforting. And that's why he couldn't get "Break On Through" out of his head: she'd been humming it on the way up the stairs.

And when she'd told him about her mother and father, the sentence that ended so abruptly--it was from "Queen of the Highway."

"You're a Doors fan," he said.

She froze, as if she'd forgotten he was there, and alive. In two strides she crossed the attic. She jammed her palm against his mouth. His broken teeth cut the inside of his lip. "Shut up. The music is okay, but if you say the words, they know."

She took her hand away, but slowly, as if she was prepared to slap it over his lips again if he said the wrong thing.

"Who is 'they?' And what will they know?"

"They killed him because of the words," she whispered. "They. You. Used to be you. They wouldn't have known he was one of us if it wasn't for the words. They were too late, though. He got the messages out there, and now we can talk to each other. But they can find us by the words, so I only use them when I have to. I knew what I was because I heard him telling it to me in the songs, when I was little. But when I sang them, they punished me."

Who had punished her for singing Doors lyrics? The stepfather who'd thrown ice water on her? Her mother, who hadn't protected her? Someone else? "But you told me you were born knowing what you are."

Her eyes narrowed, and he thought she might hit him again. Then she laughed. "How do you know which is right?"

"I don't." Reyes took a deep breath and let it out. "I have to trust you to tell me. You don't have eyes that lie."

She recognized the reference to the song lyric, and her hand sprang up to cover his mouth again.

He shook his head. "I'm just making conversation. They won't notice that." He didn't think he could have an entire conversation in Doors lyrics. Jim Morrison had never made that much sense for more than two lines at a time.

"You're not one of us. Maybe they don't notice you."

"If that's true, I might be able to talk for you. I might be able to say the things you can't say, because they'll find you."

She stared into his face, mouth slightly open, brown eyes wide. She must have looked like that when she was a little girl, before the anomaly took root. Unless she'd told him the truth about always having been this way. Another one who grew up like Chaz, alone and strange. Another one Reyes had missed helping.

Then she closed her mouth, sprang up, and began to pace the room. This time he couldn't pick out the song she hummed, though he tried until his head swam.

*

Brady drove past the sign for Dahlgren, Virginia as Worth studied the list the home rental agency had faxed them. They'd crossed off twenty-seven properties. Brady told himself it was all right if they ran out of listings. There were other cars out, the team plus local police. If he and Worth didn't find a likely hideout for Mitchell, someone else would.

But the steering wheel was slick under his palms. "Okay, this neighborhood's got a good soil match for what the lab found in Reyes's treads and wheel wells. Tell me again what else we're watching for."

"Road repair and Japanese maples." Worth juggled the rental agency list and the highway department list with the report from forensics in her lap. "The dried-mud samples off the car showed leaves, tar, and gravel a lot like what the highway department uses for fill."

Brady made the dogleg turn the GPS told him to. The asphalt in front of him was seamed and studded with dead-black patches. He stole attention from the road to glance at Worth, and found her looking at him. Neither of them said anything, though.

When the GPS directed him onto a dirt road with sandy margins, he didn't look at her again, but he knew from the shape of her in his peripheral vision that she was poised like an actor waiting for the line before his entrance.

The road petered down to something he would have called a track at the bottom of a little rise. On top of it stood a peaked-roof house, built in the first quarter of the 20th century. Its last paint job had been yellow, but there wasn't much of it left. They were looking at the back side, probably the kitchen door. Two windows on the first floor back, one a bathroom or pantry from the size, both blank with curtains or blinds. Two second-floor windows, likewise. An attic window in the roof peak. Someone had worn a path down the overgrown slope to the dirt road, which dead-ended beside the house at a wide spot with a white van parked in it.

Brady stopped the car and clenched his hands on the steering wheel to keep from touching his holster. "Would you recognize Japanese maples if you saw 'em?"

"My mom planted two in our back yard." Worth raised a not-completely-steady finger and pointed to the rank of little trees along the roadside. "That's them."

"No roses," Brady observed, and was pleased when he couldn't hear his racing heart in his voice.

"So she never brought Peretti here. She killed him in Jersey. If this is in fact the place we're looking for."

It was, though. They both knew it. If Reyes was alive, he was in there.

*

The woman held out the styrofoam cup for Reyes to take. Wary, he studied her face. Holding the cup had always been her privilege.

But she frowned and pushed it at him, making a little water slop over the lip and splash the floor. He took it from her. Half a cup. He sipped, to make it and the conversation last. When he lowered the cup, the water was tinted pink. "Thank you. Thank you for taking care of me."

She shrugged it off.

"When did your mother tell you about meeting your father?"

"Before I was in the hospital. I don't remember a lot from before the hospital, because they changed my memories."

"The hospital?"

"When I was a kid. That's where they put me for the experiments. I didn't get out for a long time."

He looked into the cup, where the overhead bulb reflected on the surface. "But you remember your stepfather throwing cold water on you."

"Maybe. I told you they changed my memories. I'm not lying." But she didn't say it angrily this time, just reflexively. They were friends now. Allies.

He wondered what would happen if he did lead her into Idlewood. If he pulled the handle and gave her the whole fucking loony bin.

Clemson McCain would kill her in a heartbeat, if Joseph Hakes didn't do it first.

He set the cup down so he could pat her hand. "No, of course not. Do you want me to help you?"

"In the hospital they said they wanted to help me. Is that what you mean?"

"No one will hurt you." Was that true? She'd killed a former FBI agent. He'd have to fight the whole damned Department of Justice to keep custody of her. Well. With great power comes great responsibility. "But I can't do anything for you from in here."

She leaped to her feet and began to pace. "They'll cut out my organs and weigh them. They'll feed my brain to rats to make them smarter. They'll pump out my blood to make poisons. I can't let you give me to them."

"Listen to me! I won't give you to them. I want to help you get the rest of your kind free. They lied to us both, remember?" He'd had his cell phone with him in his jacket. Where was his jacket? "Just let me make a phone call."

"No!"

"You can hear everything I say. I won't tell anyone where you are. Just let me talk to someone."

She stood stiffly with her back to the wall, studying Reyes, considering. "You can't protect me. You can't even protect you. No."

"It's what you wanted," he offered, softly, picking up the cup again. "To get your people back."

*

The rescue team assembled where the dirt road curved toward the house on its little rise of land. They'd come down the track with headlights out, with vehicle dome lights turned off for when the doors opened; now SWAT armored up by penlight, and uniforms checked orders by the light of phones and PDAs. The ambulance was a dark open box, with only the indicator lights on the equipment inside showing light. Radios clicked instead of crackled; the hush was barely broken by the whisper of "Unit two in position, over." "Copy unit two, over."

Brady found Falkner by her FBI jacket and her position as stable point in the center of the whirlpool. He took up his stance behind and to the left of her, a little visual muscle and a tall object for everyone else to steer by. He'd left Hafidha, Lau, and Chaz keeping watch over the house. Todd and Worth caught his eye from the crowd before Falkner. *Present and accounted for. Who's the sheepdog now?*

Falkner was briefing the SWAT and uniform lead officers. "Evidence suggests Mitchell is abnormally strong and probably unusually fast. She's certainly emotionally unstable. Don't come within reach of her, and for your own safety and that of the hostage, act to keep a lid on the situation rather than escalate it. My team will try to talk her down. If we can keep from ending this in a hail of bullets, everybody gets promoted, trust me."

One officer said, "Is she armed?"

Falkner inclined her head. Her command voice made you feel like you could fly and walk through an artillery barrage, if only she asked you to. "She's taken an active and a retired federal agent captive. We have to assume she has their weapons. No one goes in without a vest."

The cop said, "Best we can do. Let's get it done, people."

As the group broke up, Brady approached through the dispersing officers. A paramedic dodged past him to the ambulance and proceeded to check

connections on oxygen tanks. *Like bringing your umbrella. Maybe that'll keep us from needing them.* "Where do you want us?" he asked Falkner.

"You go in with me, back door. Todd and Worth take the front. SWAT will clear the first floor, because I don't think that's where she'll be."

Brady shook his head. "She'll tuck him away, as far from the doors as possible."

"Exactly. Basement or second floor, or the attic if it's accessible. Lau and the betas have the basement--"

"Legion of Superheroes," he cracked, to see her smile. "I'd pay to see Chaz slither in one of those tiny windows parkour style."

Smile she did, a little, tightly. Gratefully. *Good noncom*, Brady congratulated himself, even though that was Todd's job. "We need to be first up the stairs."

"Let's hope we don't have the wrong house and scare someone's granny to death."

The paramedic slammed the ambulance door like a gunshot.

"Christ on a bike," Brady gasped.

Falkner was already running up the slope. She yanked up the binocs hanging on their cord around her neck, peered through them, and dropped them to use the mic on her wrist.

"Now!" her voice cracked like a whip in his earpiece. "Move in now! We've been spotted!"

*

The woman turned from the window. "You told them where we are."

Reyes pressed his shoulders hard against the wall and kept his face blank. What had she seen out there in the dark? A fleet of police cars, riding to the rescue? One lost motorist, coming to ask directions?

She said, "You got word to them. Some kind of tracking device? I should've pulled out all your teeth."

Reyes shook his head. "I didn't get word to anyone. I want to help you. We should go now, go and free the others."

She crossed the room to him. "Bait. They dangled you in front of me. To lure me out where they could find me. I should've known. You were too perfect."

"How could they have done that? You found me yourself. Tell me how you did that. We'll see if they could have interfered." *Distract her with a puzzle.* He tried to remember a relevant Morrison lyric, or an irrelevant one, but his memory was emptier than the attic.

"My name was Hope," she said. She inhaled deep, and her expression might have been a little sad as she declared, slow and measured, "A cold girl'll kill you in a darkened room." A line from a Doors song. So he knew she meant it.

A crash as the front and back doors were broken in. Shouting voices. He couldn't make out the words. *A few seconds. A minute at most. Trust them. They came.*

Reyes gasped, ducked away, talking so fast the clotted blood broke from his mouth. "If you do that, there's no way they'll let you live. Please, just let me talk to them--"

She swung her clasped hands in a blow meant to break his neck.

He threw himself sideways. The toothbrush dug into his thigh. His shirt was in the way, he couldn't find the hem, couldn't get at his waistband. She sprang at him, arms reaching, and the toothbrush was in his hand, the bristles scraping his palm. He lunged to meet her. He drove the toothbrush into her belly as hard as he could.

She screamed, but it sounded like rage. She grabbed at the neck of his t-shirt, grabbed a second fistful over his shoulder blades, and swung him at the window.

He had an instant to see the bars rushing toward his face, to get his hands partway up.

His vision whited out. When she dropped him, he slid down the wall, because he had no legs.

It seemed like a long, dark trip to the floor.

*

Falkner felt Brady behind her as she hit the stairs to the second floor, pistol at the end of her arms. "Hope Mitchell!" she bellowed. "FBI!" Stairs two at a time, Brady at her hip like a sword. She heard Todd's voice and Worth's, knew them like a hunter knows her dogs.

She sprang over the ruins of a stair railing, pushed to one side of the second-floor hall, noted the raw newness of the splintered wood with the part of her mind she wasn't using. Crime scene analysis was later. This was incursion in force into enemy territory, move fast and keep moving. Two soldiers and a first responder at her back because they understood without being told.

The door at the bottom of the attic stairway stood open. There was another door at the top, also open. Framed in its rectangle, harsh-lit from above and behind, stood a small, skinny woman. Her shoulders rose and fell with panting, her feet were braced hip-wide, her empty hands hovered ready at her thighs. Her fine, tangled hair hung forward over one dark eye; the other burned down at Falkner. A long smear of blood marked the front of her sleeveless shirt.

Falkner's front sight picture was the middle of Mitchell's chest. "FBI--don't move! Hope Mitchell, you're under a--"

"I killed him!" she shouted, each word flung staccato down the stairs. "You're too late, he's dead! Now I'll kill you."

She felt the trigger under her finger.

"Esther!" A horrible, mangled, garbled voice. But a voice she knew.

Mitchell took one step back from the stairs and looked back into the room. She hadn't been frightened of Falkner, and Brady, and Todd and Worth, guns drawn. Stephen Reyes's voice, coming from behind her, had frightened her.

"Hold your fire!" Falkner shouted. And because they were hers, because they trusted her, they did.

"No!" Mitchell's scream had grief in it, a terrible loss. She spun and ran back into the attic room.

Falkner bolted up the stairs.

Mitchell had bent one of the bars over the attic window and was yanking desperately at a second. Reyes lay at her feet, his eyes squeezed closed, too

much blood on his face to see where it was coming from. He was alive. "Don't shoot," he croaked.

"Don't do it, Hope," Falkner said.

Mitchell cast a frantic glance over her shoulder and pulled harder at the bar.

"If you make the drop to the ground without breaking your legs, the police outside will shoot you as soon as you stand. They're not used to people like you. They'll try to kill you, but they'll only wound you. Then they'll take you into custody. I won't be able to stop them."

Beside her, Brady shifted his weight. That was all the sign she had that he understood. Mitchell had lied about killing Reyes, because she'd rather die than be arrested.

"Listen to her," Reyes croaked. "You'll be helpless. *They'll* find you. This is my team, Hope. They'll do as I say. Remember what I promised?"

Falkner heard him lean on the pronouns. He'd connected. He'd learned her mythology and used it. He'd stayed alive. He wanted Mitchell to stay alive, too.

"No no no no." With each repetition, Mitchell flung her strength and her little weight into bending the bar in her fists. It sagged inward.

"Let us handle your arrest," Falkner continued, her eyes never leaving Mitchell. "We'll keep you safe. We'll listen to your story. We can get you what you're looking for." Since it was a reasonable bet she was looking for something.

"Please," said Reyes. Falkner could barely hear him. He'd used his last strength on that shout. "Please trust me. I trusted you."

Mitchell let go of the bar and stood stiff as a tree, her head bent down. Then she turned with a jerk so sharp Falkner almost shot her in surprise. She stuck her arms straight up like a child playing cops and robbers, never raising her head. "Okay."

It was a second before Falkner believed she'd heard right.

Brady and Todd stepped forward to put cuffs on her. Falkner and Worth hurried to Reyes.

"Are you okay?" Falkner asked as she untied the zip cord and peeled it carefully away from his puffy wrists.

Reyes swallowed with an effort. His face was swollen and mottled with bruises. "Yeah."

Worth made an angry teakettle noise. "Just once, when someone asks that, could one of us say 'No?'"

That startled Reyes's eyes open. Then he closed them again, and his mouth twitched up at one corner. "Probably not," he whispered. The words were blurry, as if he were talking with his mouth full. "Esther. Don't let her be processed, or we'll never get her out. She's..."

"I know. She's a cop killer. Why do you want this one so badly?"

Reyes's eyes opened again, and again from surprise. He frowned. "Just don't..."

"I'll try." Because she could only promise to do her best.

*

There was only room for three once the paramedics flowed into that stained, metallic attic room; room for two once they wrestled the stretcher up the narrow stairs. Daphne Worth took herself outside.

The ambulance lights were on now, painting the bleached siding of the house in ice cream stripes of red and blue. Lau stood, arms crossed, halfway down the dirt path, chin ducked into her cellphone. It was back in her hand and holstered by the time Worth caught up.

"Todd and Brady?"

"Looking over the house," Lau said. Deceptively mild, once you knew what you were looking for. "Chaz is securing the van for Evidence. And we are?"

Worth looked beyond her, to the two parked ambulances on the road. One was growing a tumour of law enforcement that looked more malignant by the minute. "Calling shotgun on our gamma."

The growth was eight officers deep by the time Lau and Worth reached the ambulance doors. Two paramedics -- neither the one who had slammed the door, who was clever enough to get out of sight if nothing else -- had Hope Mitchell seated in the back. "Let's see your eyes," Worth heard; the male one

produced a flashlight and flicked it on. Mitchell's jaw twitched. She turned away.

Worth didn't even have to think, some days, to see the body sit up on the stretcher in the back of her old ambulance.

She hefted herself up into the back of the bus only a second slower than she would have back then. One of the paramedics turned--

She wasn't a paramedic. Dominica Magdziak, BAU. New kid before Worth had been the new kid. "Worth," she said, nodding. "Don't worry. We'll take it from here."

Worth gritted her teeth. There was no polite way to say *Get your hands off my collar.*

"It's an ACTF arrest," she said.

"Bossman asked me in here," Dominica said, and shrugged. Worth risked a glance at Hope Mitchell. She was sitting very, very still indeed.

"Right," Worth said, and backed out, down to the ground. Lau eyebrowed a question at her, and she answered, "Celentano."

Victor Celentano was around the side of the other ambulance, choreographing a remote number between the nearest available hospital and two of his ballistic-vested agents. He glanced up when Worth and Lau approached him, nodded. Finished his phone call.

If there was no good way to pry another agent's hands off your collar, there were even fewer to do the same with your boss's boss. "Sir," Worth said, and floundered.

She felt more than saw Lau settle at her side, smooth and professional. "We wanted to find out when we can officially assume custody of Hope Mitchell."

Celentano crooked a smile. "Very smooth, Agent Lau. We'll be keeping her in BAU custody for the present time."

Bastard, Worth thought, sudden. "She's one of ours, sir. Agent Reyes will want her remanded to Idlewood."

The humor was still on Celentano's face. That was probably good. "Agent Reyes can discuss the disposition of the suspect when he's released from the hospital and returned to active duty. In the meantime, Hope Mitchell is suspected of killing a retired federal agent. She almost killed another. It was your team that established her as a suspect in the killing of a federal marshal eight years ago. Those crimes aren't the ACTF's purview."

The crowd of officers was pushing in closer.

"Sir, we promised her we would personally oversee her arrest and transport," Worth said. "She surrendered to us under those conditions."

Lau shifted forward. She might not have heard the conversation upstairs, but she didn't need that to pick up her cue. "Hope Mitchell's a paranoid schizophrenic. Consistency of contact would go a long way to ensuring further cooperation, as would an escort by the officers she surrendered to."

"I read that book too, Agent Lau," Celentano looked between them. "Even wrote some of it."

"I don't know what deal you have with SSA Reyes," Worth said, formally; her mouth didn't even get to open on the *but*.

"No, you don't," Celentano said, and Worth's stomach sank. Conversation definitely over.

Celentano nodded at his right- and left-hand minions. "Hastings and Magdziak will ride along. Any further discussion on this will have to come from your supervisors. Thank you for your work today," he said formally, and they were dismissed.

Lau waited until they were out of earshot to say, "I guess someone thinks this will generate a nice press conference and photo op." She sounded as outraged as Worth felt.

They rounded the back of Mitchell's ambulance as the doors closed, a quick double bang that made Worth almost nostalgic. *Oh, for the days of manageable crises.* It peeled off right as the second opened its big red-and-white arms to receive Reyes's stretcher into the loving embrace of professional medical attention. The paramedics hoisted and hustled him in, and as Falkner climbed in behind them, she looked down at Daphne. *And?*

"Celentano will consider a formal custody transfer request from our supervisors," she said dryly, and clamped her mouth shut.

She didn't think Mom's face could get any grimmer. "All right. Stay by the phone, please."

That was a given. Saying it meant *This isn't over.*

The paramedics secured the ambulance doors and revved the engine, peeled off onto the bumpy road. Worth looked at Lau. Lau looked at Worth. They let out twin long breaths.

Stephen Reyes would have won that argument.

*

Esther Falkner sat in the waiting area of the emergency department, wishing that her team would stop doing this. Because she wanted to stop doing this.

As soon as the staff finished with Reyes here, they'd admit him, because the head trauma alone was enough to guarantee he'd be wearing a hospital gown for the next few days. Falkner would wait at his bedside for him to be coherent enough to want to talk. Because he would want to talk. She felt a sudden exasperated fondness for her boss.

Her phone played the first line of "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and she answered with, "Falkner."

"I'm at..." She heard Brady ask someone nearby for landmarks. "218 and Caledon Road. The ambulance's here, wrapped around a tree. Agent Hastings has spinal cord injuries. Agent Magdziak's dead. So are both EMTs. Mitchell's gone." His brisk, flat delivery said, better than words, *We told them so.* It was a way to push away anger and grief.

Falkner's hands were cold, and her head was filled with long lists of things that needed doing, some of them mutually contradictory. Other people could take care of most of them. She gave voice to the one that definitely fell to her. "She knows who we are. If she doesn't know where we live yet, she can find out. Tell the team. They get police detail whether they like it or not."

"God damn," Brady said wearily.

"And Brady--family and friends, too. Even if they think no one knows who their friends are, make sure they warn them and get them to someplace safe

if necessary."

A beat, then Brady said, "Got it." Falkner hoped he did; that was as close to poking into his business as she felt comfortable with right now.

Ben and the girls could go out of town. Maybe she could even think of a destination that would console them for the necessity.

Reyes would love waking up to this.

*

When the blood was cleaned away, Chaz found Stephen Reyes unrecognizable. Broken nose, eyes swollen almost shut, three cracked ribs and a cracked jaw, not to mention the teeth Hope Mitchell had knocked out with a hammer. Also dehydration, exposure, a sprained knee, a fractured toe, and a smorgasbord of head trauma. Some of that would scar.

That was okay. You had to be alive to grow scar tissue.

The team were taking it in shifts to watch him, as they had Chaz, and Chaz was pretty sure they noticed when he volunteered for double duty. *He* noticed that nobody tried to talk him out of it. Not even Daphs.

When Reyes was taken off sedation more than forty-eight hours later, it was Chaz who arranged to be in the room when he opened his eyes . His cracked lips moved. He winced. Chaz was ready with the lemon swab.

So this is how it feels, he thought, clinically, and forgave Danny Brady all sorts of things.

What he said was, "Welcome back."

The swab came away bloody, but it was old blood. Chaz dropped it in a biohazard bag. "Hope?" Reyes asked.

Yeah, he'd known that would be the first question. "We lost custody. Celentano took her. She escaped. She killed Magdziak and broke Hastings' neck. I'm sorry."

The heart monitor accelerated. Reyes looked as if his pulse were suffocating him. He tried to lift his head and it fell back against the pillow, but his crushed-looking mouth framed another word. "Team?"

The fear was in his eyes, and Chaz could read it there. *Please let her not have come for one of us.*

Chaz shook his head. "A woman's body was found in a fire in a board-up in Baltimore. She fits much of Hope Mitchell's description, and the remains of the clothes on the body appear to be the ones Mitchell was wearing when she escaped. Firemen found a broken pair of handcuffs in the same room."

Reyes closed his eyes. Chaz touched his hand to get him back. "Reyes?"

The hiss of words spoken but unvoiced. Chaz leaned forward to pick it up. "Fits much of the description?"

Chaz paused too long. He knew he did, but he had to force himself to speak. "Her head and hands are missing. Frost estimates ten days for DNA confirmation. Cause of death--" He shoved his hands under his armpits, knowing Reyes would see and read it. "Ligature strangulation."

Some part of him half-hoped Reyes would ask. And how would he answer, if so? *I don't know. I have these dreams where I kill people. Where I kill people who are me.*

"Oh, Christ," Reyes said. There was sound in it this time. He stopped to breathe, harsh pained sucking noises.

Chaz remembered how his throat had felt after the NG tube came out, and he hadn't been ventilated. While Reyes dragged at air, Chaz unwrapped another lemon swab.

This time, Reyes lifted his hand to receive it. When he had wet his mouth, he added, "When I was...talking to her. She said 'us.' Not as if she meant--" He drew a shaky arc with one hand before it dropped back to the sheet. "Maybe an accomplice."

Chaz tilted his head, but stopped when the gesture made Reyes flinch. "The anomaly usually doesn't play well with others."

"If it's Mitchell, someone wanted her dead and hard to ID. If it's not, someone wants to convince us it is."

"Could be Mitchell herself, covering her disappearance."

"Feels wrong," Reyes said. "She's... she was not organized enough for her plans. Paranoid schizophrenia. I think somebody was helping her."

He rubbed his face cautiously with a hand dripping monitor and IV leads, avoiding the Steri-Strips and gauze as if the sensation brought him back to the attic room and the landscape of Mitchell's mind.

It was Chaz's turn to wince in sympathy. Weird, feeling that, when he wasn't actually any less angry. "We won't stand down yet." He rose from his chair, working his tight shoulders. Reyes would see him do it, but if Reyes couldn’t already figure out he was twitchy, the apocalypse was at hand, and he had more to worry about than looking invulnerable in front of his boss.

Reyes's pained mocking smile widened enough that Chaz could spot a black gap between his teeth. "Can you--can you call someone for me? Explain? Apologize profusely?"

Chaz winked. "Delphine White? Don't worry. Mom already did that."

Reyes closed his eyes. Was that surprise or relief? While Chaz was debating, Reyes gestured at himself, vaguely. "How bad?"

"You're going to need dental surgery. I bet you knew that." Chaz took away the latest besmirched swab. "But they didn't have to drill a hole in your head. Figure three weeks to light duty, though the betting pool has you back in two. Now get some rest. I'm going to let the gang know you're among... us again."

Reyes reached out to him, but he backed away, because it was getting too hard to hide the trembling. Being in a hospital room with a badly injured agent wasn't easy. Being in the same room with Stephen Reyes and no work to talk about wasn't easy either, even now.

Chaz was working on forgiveness. This would help, though it made him feel sick to think so.

There was no hurt in Reyes's expression; only acknowledgment, acceptance. Compassion. Because *he* knew too much about people to hold their weaknesses and frailties against them.

Chaz stayed in the room until Reyes's eyes closed, though when he turned away he knew the Old Man wasn't sleeping. Reyes was humming under his breath. Odd; Chaz never would have figured him for a Doors fan.

Thank you to Jeff Gibbons for finding out what Stephen Reyes drives, and to the Service and Parts departments of Don Mackey Cadillac of Tucson for helping me disable one of their cars.

Bits of Doors lyrics quoted in dialogue come from "The Changeling," "Queen of the Highway," "Break On Through," and "Cars Hiss by My Window."

League

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., December 2008

Stephen Reyes knows his own nature as well as any man can. Self-awareness is something you owe the world, when you're a bastard.

He's not proud of what he is, but he also knows the futility of changing. And paying some attention helps keep the son-of-a-bitch off the undeserving.

He's also aware of language, and so he knows just how unfair that terminology--*bastard, son-of-a-bitch*--is to his mother. Her son's cast-iron hardassery is not her fault.

But neither is his meticulous and categorical mind, although he thinks she's probably where he got the trained social awareness and observation, and the habitual manipulation of everything and everyone around him. The control issues, though--those are definitely from his dad.

Stephen Reyes knows that one of the ways he exerts that control--and expresses that meticulousness--is in categorization. He knows his sorts are arbitrary, that there are boundary cases and borderline instances. Nothing about the natural world is ever black and white, yes or no, one or zero. Everything falls along a spectrum--the spectrum, say, from a Joseph Lawrence Hakes or Jason Saito to a Hafidha Gates or a Charles Villette, which could pass through a Sofia Akadiou and a Susannah Greenwood somewhere along the way. But it's handy to establish categories, rules of thumb: alpha, beta, gamma.

His team falls into sorts, too: natural fracture lines, self-establishing categories. There are the younger agents and the older ones, and Brady splitting the difference. There are the agents who found the Anomalous Crimes Task Force because they came looking for it, because they needed answers: Brady, Todd, Worth. There are the ones who fell into it, and found a place where they were needed... or who found an obsession that consumed their careers, more or less: himself, Falkner, Lau.

And there are the ones he went out seeking: Gates and Villette.

He can divide them other ways, such as by specialty. Falkner, Lau, Worth, and Todd for interviews, for soothing ruffled feathers. Todd, Gates, and Villette for research. Brady and Worth for crime scenes. And so on, including specialists for all the dirty work.

But there are also the internal divisions. The friendships. The cliques. He doesn't mind: good partnerships can make a larger organization work more seamlessly. As team leader, he's aware of them: himself, Todd, and Falkner--divided by experience and command. Hafidha, Villette, and Worth: the betas and their guardian. And last and tightest, but definitely not least, Brady and Lau.

That's a more cryptic association, a partnership whose root causes puzzle even Reyes, though he has some theories (they both have a bit of a martyr complex, they both have a powerful protective drive, they both have alienated families and a military background of sorts) but it's a bond he'd be a fool not to recognize and use.

The closest approximation he can manage is that it comes down to why they're there--even though they're not there for the same reasons. For Brady, it's personal. The anomaly hurt him, and hurt him badly. For Lau, it's a matter of intellectual commitment, of an ingrained belief in justice and in doing what's right. It doesn't have to be personal for her to be effective, driven, unrelenting.

Sometimes, Stephen Reyes thinks Nicolette Lau is the closest thing to a really decent, selfless human being that he's ever met. Sometimes.

Until he remembers that her drive isn't selfless: it is her self, her self-definition. She chooses to be the crime-fighter she is because she needs to be that person. Because she needs to justify her existence, and her family isn't about to accept any rationale she offers. So in the face of those insurmountable odds, she's made the healthier decision to prove to herself that she's a good person who has made good choices and who is making a difference in the world.

The jokes about Wonder Woman aren't jokes.

But Wonder Woman doesn't just work alone. She's part of a team, a core group of like-minded superheroes with very different backgrounds. Some of them operate, like her, out of a devotion to justice. Some are intellectually

motivated. Some are idealists, and some are colonialist aliens who just *happen* to be imposing values in agreement with Western democratic thought.

And some? Some are driven by their broken hearts.

The Batman seeks vengeance. Redemption. He pursues closure, and since closure is the most elusive quarry of all, the hunt never gives him rest.

So, in the privacy of his own head, Reyes thinks of Brady and Lau as Bruce and Diana, and--because narrative and fiction are all about establishing patterns in a chaotic world--that makes the friendship make more sense to him than it might otherwise.

Because what do Diana and Bruce have in common?

Well, when it comes right down to it, rather a lot.

T’ai Chi

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington D.C., January 2009

Daphne Worth's head has been killing her for the better part of three hours, she thinks, but she glances at the clock to be sure. Winter means there will be no trace of light in the windows behind Lau's desk for hours yet, but it's long since stopped being last night and moved into *this morning*.

Chaz must notice her searching glance with the eyes on the back of his head or his Enhanced Beta Senses, because without looking up, he says, "It's four in the morning."

The end of December, Daphne Worth thinks helplessly. *I'm writing you now just to see if you're better.*

"Fuck," she mutters, pressing the backs of her knuckles to her eyes. "Thanks for the earworm."

"Sorry." He must be looking up now, because his chair creaks and the sound goes through her temples like a lobotomy with an obsidian knitting needle. "No caffeine today?"

She'd shake her head, but she thinks the pain would make her puke. "No, I had some. And naproxen. And nothing. Eyestrain, it's just eyestrain."

And stress, but she doesn't say that. Can't say that, not to Chaz. Not when--well. Not when he and Hafidha are the ones with reasons to be stressed, and her own life is so gods-damned perfect right now that it's like the Good Fairy kissed her on top of the head.

His chair creaks again and she burrows her fists into her sockets until the pressure aches. Chaz can move silently when he wants to. She doesn't realize he's come up behind her until he says "don't spook" at her shoulder and she feels his warmth an inch from her back. A second later she's enfolded in the comforting aroma of Chaz, which is to say human animal and coffee and garlic and green Speedstick and the fruit-smelling conditioner Hafs gave him for his hair when they were tarting him up, all those months previous. And not even a trace of nail polish remover, even though they've all been here since 8 am yesterday. *Good* boy.

"Not spooking," she replies.

"Put your hands down. Leave your eyes closed. Say 'no' if this goes weird on you."

She obeys. A sliding sound makes her turn her head, but she doesn't realize it's his rubbing hands until the heated fingers press her orbits, knead, work her temples in hard circles. Big hands, bony, strong. Long enough to cover her whole oily exhausted face. His fingers slide through her hair, firm pressure, enveloping her skull. They find her occiput and her cervical vertebrae and drum like raindrops. She wonders if he remembers her thumbs locked under his jaw, her fingers stretched to their aching utmost to hold his spine erect, and lets her head fall back into his hands.

He turns it left, first, and stretches slowly, her chin to her collarbone until her heart almost races, aware of how little it would take, in this position, for him to sever her spinal cord. A careful rotation and right, for symmetry. Back to neutral and then fingers scrub across her jaw, her cheeks, her forehead, into her hair, down again, over the ears. Fingers digging behind her jaw and finding pain, unearthing and releasing it, gently pulling her ears and then running through her hair again.

He steps back. "You can open your eyes now."

She does, and finds the pain--not gone, but lessened. Withstandable. "Wow. Bear my children?"

"T'ai chi," he says, scissoring back to his own chair in a stride and a half of long legs. "Knew all the damn PT would eventually be useful for something."

The Scene

Somewhere in Virginia, March 2009

Spring, Solomon Todd thought, should always be like this. Gleaming bikes lined blacktop under cherry trees, shade and petals dappling silk-smooth custom paint. Men in ripped jeans mingled with women in babydoll tank-tops. A candy-apple red trike purred slowly through the curve, piloted by a guy with iron-gray hair. Yesterday's five o'clock shadow glinted on his pitted cheeks like a scattering of mica.

Todd turned to watch it go, the sun warm on his shoulders, a beer in a lemonade cup chilling his right hand. He was about to turn back and continue his mall crawl down the row of custom bikes when a comfortably-plump sixtyish white woman with graying brunette hair stepped out of the crowd. She wore a tight pink t-shirt blazoned with a dove. More shirts draped her left arm; she held another out with her right hand. Todd smiled at her: he must have been wearing his approachable journalist face.

"Hi," she said, her voice dreamily, distantly familiar. "I'm fundraising for My Sister's Place. It's a domestic violence shelter. Here's my ID" --she lifted her chest to display a laminated tag, locks of hair slipping against her neck-- "And for twenty dollars, we have t-shirts, too. You look like a guy who's confident enough in his own masculinity to wear pink."

Todd squinted at her tag, trying not to look like he was staring at her chest. Mehitabel Percy. That seemed vaguely familiar, too. He made eye contact and dug for his wallet with the un-beer-bearing hand. "Domestic violence shelter? Man, the scene has changed."

"For the better," she said, with a grin, and then blinked and stepped back. "Omygawd, you're Solomon Todd."

He tilted his head, with a shiver of self-conscious embarrassment. He must have seen her at a signing, back when he still did such things. "I don't autograph body parts."

"Excuse me?"

Her expression of befuddlement was not feigned. Todd felt a rush of relief-- and secondary affection. "Oh, thank God, you're not a fan. No, nevermind.

What can I do for you? I'm afraid I don't really have good recall of most of 1975..."

Mehitabel Percy laughed out loud, head thrown back to show her throat, and dropped the T-shirt in her right hand back in the pile draped over her left arm. "You used to live with my friend Chrissy Parker."

With the free hand, Mehitabel pushed her hair off her face. Despite the gentle weathered softening of lines and pounds and years, Todd saw a girl of twenty-five in her, and remembered. "Oh, my god. Yes. You're Belle." She'd been a Hells Angels girl, the old lady of two or three different guys over the course of the time he'd spent in California. He remembered her, abruptly, skinny and half-naked, straddling the pillion seat of Flea's chopper with a Coors dangling from gnawed fingers, her torn denim skirt riding most of the way up her thighs. These days she was probably somebody's grandmother.

"Mehitabel, now. My mom was a don marquis fan. Eventually I grew resigned, then affectionate. You know how it is."

Solomon Todd did indeed. Sometime around age thirty, he'd conceived of a ferocious affection for his previously-despised first name. He grinned. "Well, you absolutely just sold me a shirt. Can I also buy you a beer?"

"No beer at this gig." Her sigh contained themes and elaborations. "The scene is also family-friendly. Or at least this part of it is."

Todd sloshed his paper cup, revealing the absent rattle of ice. "Shh. Don't tell. There's five more in a thermal pouch in my saddlebag."

Eyes widening, she grinned. "Gee, Mr. Todd. Where *is* your bike? And does it have any etchings? On our way there, I think I'll stop and get a lemonade. Just the thing in this unseasonable heat... you know, Chrissy still talks about you sometimes."

Todd winced. "Ow. After thirty years? I guess I probably shouldn't put off sending that apology card much longer."

"Rave reviews, actually."

He didn't know quite what to say to that, so he shrugged and pointed with his chin, back the way he had come. Mehitabel's sandals purred on the road

much the same way the trike's wheels had. When he glanced at her sideways, she was already looking. She winked.

"Weren't you a blonde?" he asked, for lack of anything better to say.

"Didn't you have more hair?" she answered, which made him spray laughter. Oh, history. And then she frowned, and said, "So, Solomon Todd, what are you doing tonight?"

"Buying an old friend dinner?" he asked.

She grinned and did a subtle spot check of his left hand, but then looked back up, realizing--or reminded--that any evidence of marriage wouldn't be on his ring finger. "Bringing me home to the Missus? That might not go over well."

Ahh, the leading question. "Never married," he said. "Well, there was this one time in Haiti--"

She laughed again, sharp and vivid. "I did," she said. "Three times. The only one I wanted to keep up and died on me three years ago, the son of a bitch."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

She dismissed it with a wave of her hand, but he saw the pinch between the eyebrows. Three years was not such a long time. "I'm recovering." She bumped him with a shoulder, shock of warm soft flesh through cloth. "That's a warning."

Full of benevolence and fellow-feeling, Todd looked at her and smiled. God, he loved this game.

Truth: Ohio

Way back in '68, Ohio, Kent State (no way, wrong date)

I.

In May of 1970, the great Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote, *Of course: / Bullets don't like people / who love flowers.*

Well--of course--he didn't write that exactly. That's Anthony Kahn's translation, also from 1970. Yevtushenko's poem, "Bullets and Flowers," was a propaganda piece, published in *Pravda*--"Truth"--which, as the reader will no doubt already be aware, is the house organ of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. "Bullets and Flowers" begins as a eulogy for 19-year-old Allison Krause, killed on the commons of Kent State University in Kent, Ohio on May 4th, 1970 while participating in a student protest. She was shot once through the heart at a range of 343 feet by an unidentified National Guardsman armed with an M1 Garand rifle, bayonet affixed.

During the Kent State massacre (or shootings, or murders--the preferred terminology varies depending on the politics of the speaker) 12 other casualties occurred during the same 13-second barrage, three of whom died. One was rendered paraplegic by a bullet which shattered his spinal column. One of the students killed--a bystander, who was not participating in the protest--was a member of the Kent State ROTC chapter.

Yevtushenko's poem leans heavily on the fact that Krause reportedly had also participated in protests the previous day, and was quoted as saying "Flowers are better than bullets" while she placed a blossom in the barrel of an M1 Garand rifle. It would be poetic to believe it was the same rifle that killed her, and--in fact--artistic license has since conflated the two events, the placing of the flower and the shooting of the student. But the truth of the matter is that there is no reason to believe that the gun she decorated is the gun that killed her. Not all of the 77 Guardsmen present discharged their weapons. Of the 29 who admitted firing, some claimed to have fired into the air.

"Bullets and Flowers" goes on to explicate in detail the uselessness and frailty of flowers in times of war. It becomes a condemnation of U.S. policy

in Vietnam--a sentiment which those of the Kent State victims who were actually involved in the protests would no doubt find laudable--and from there it shifts to a call to arms, a clarion cry to the children of the world demanding they rise up and overthrow a corrupt system, become a legion of flowers... armed with bullets.

II.

Earlier, protestors had distributed leaflets inviting students to a demonstration at which the protestors announced they planned to napalm a dog. When the audience arrived, they found protestors gathered around a table on which stood, indeed, a shivering dog.

The students announced that they had no intention of allowing the protestors to burn the dog alive.

The protestors replied, "Then why aren't you doing something about the napalming of people in Vietnam?"

It wasn't those words exactly, of course. Eyewitness reports are notoriously inaccurate.

Some eyewitnesses reported that the barrage into the crowd, later that same day, lasted a minute or more. But it was 13 seconds, and 67 bullets were fired.

III.

The sound of massed gunfire is not what you would expect. You don't realize at first what it is that you're hearing. Is that fireworks? Is it something breaking apart? Once you do--once the screams begin, once the wind brings you the stink of gunpowder--it still takes a while for the truth to sink in. The sound seems to go on for a long time--far longer than 13 seconds. Surely that was a minute, at least. Two minutes.

But people are still milling in place. Sitting on the grass crying. Some still haven't realized what just happened. The human mind is not equipped to deal with gunfire. You have to be trained for it.

It's hard to tell at first who's hurt and who's just in shock. Uninjured bystanders drip red from splatter or from their attempts to assist; the wounded may not even know they are bleeding.

IV.

They never intended to burn that dog.

V.

"Bullets and Flowers" was a rush job, like another great piece of Kent State propaganda: the Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song "Ohio," which was released as a single and receiving national airplay within twenty days of the shootings. ("Shootings" is perhaps the most accurate term, as it acknowledges that most of the casualties were not killed, after all.)

The CSNY song also mentions Allison Krause, inaccurately. It references John Filo's Pulitzer-Prize-winning photograph of a fourteen-year-old runaway, Mary Ann Vecchio, who knelt weeping over the dead body of Jeffrey Glen Miller (also a student protestor, shot through the face and killed instantly at 265 yards). The lyric of the song runs: *What if you knew her and found her dead on the ground?*

Miss Vecchio is not known to have been acquainted with Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller, of course, was not a *her*.

"Ohio" peaked at #14 on the Billboard Hot 100. It had a profound effect on the national perception of the shootings at Kent State, as the shootings at Kent State had a profound effect on the national perception of the Nixon Administration and the war in Vietnam.

VI.

In the midst of his true and angry poem (unless it is his *Truth*-published effort at propaganda), Yevgeny Yevtushenko also wrote--or was translated to have written:

All the dead are bums.
It's not their crime.
You lie in the grass,
a melting candy in your mouth,
done with dressing in new clothes,
done with books.

I don't know if Miss Krause had a candy in her mouth when she died, or if that's a poetic interpolation, like the fictionalized images of Krause being

shot at short range by a bullet that tears a battered white daisy from a gun barrel.

But it's an effective one.

***

--from "Ten Years After: Kent State in the Rearview," Solomon Todd, *The Nation*, May 1980.

Misadventure

Somewhere and somewhen in California

Stink of greasy denim sweaty in the dry California heat. Heartbeat throb of a chopped Harley Davidson FLH Electra-Glide shovelhead, model year 1970. Mostly. The sting of sunlight burns through my sleeves and jeans; the sting of wind slaps my face. Desert spins by so fast it's hard to tell the mesquite from the Joshua trees. The road is a whipping gray line.

I want to hug the ripped Levi's vest in front of me and press my nose to the winged, helmeted skull that brands it. But a little voice in my head keeps saying *look cool, look cool*, so I push back into my white-knuckle grip on the sissy bar and try to remember how to pray.

The chopper's front wheel extends like a testing snout. The guy straddling its cut-down tank dangles from his ape hangers--hyper-extended handlebars--his shoulder-length rats of reddish-brown hair whipping my face as we lean into a curve. Instinctively, I drag in my knees.

No helmet, no gloves, no leathers. If you hit that pavement at this speed, denim and boots would peel off like the shell of a hard-boiled egg and the rest of you would follow.

This motorcycle club doesn't brake: ride hard, fear nothing--or go down. Six months from now, I will have learned to keep up. But today, I'm on charity.

Riding bitch behind a Hells Angel at a hundred miles an hour.

--*Life by Misadventure*, Solomon Todd, St. Martin's Press, 1978

Community Service

Facebook chat transcript, Somewhere in the internet, April 7, 2009

Charles Villette 8:54pm
So when last we spoke, you were packing for a position in Ohio. How'd a brilliant young statistician like yourself wind up in scenic Iowa?

Rohit Mehta 8:55pm
I'm a two for one, actually. University of Iowa wanted David, and he made them take me as a dual hire. This is tt line and Akron was never going to give me tenure anyway, not unless the department head got hit by a truck, so here I am.

Rohit Mehta 8:55pm
What are you doing in DC? Teaching at GWU? Tell me it's not some conservative think tank. Actually, tell me it is, and you can buy me dinner someplace incredibly expensive.

Charles 8:55pm
Oh, like that's gonna happen. I'm a poor public servant. I got a job at the FBI.

Rohit 8:55pm
You're an analyst? I thought that was more a CIA kind of deal. Ooo, my roomie the spook!

Charles 8:56pm
Umfieldagentaksually. Like on TV.

Rohit 8:56pm
...with a gun? Also like on TV? Are there helicopters? You did the whole Quantico thing?

Charles 8:57pm
Well. Not so much like on TV. Mostly I push paper. Piles and piles and piles of paper. ViCAP is on the internet as of last summer and one of my jobs is sorting through incoming reports, some of which are like, thirty years young and just getting typed in by temps and interns now.

Rohit 8:58pm
You're a field agent? Oh my God. Is this some kind of community service

deal for all the shit you used to jump off of???

Boys

Washington D.C., February 2009

You turned away from some Boy's appraising eyes in the mirror and curled your hands around the glass, wondered if you should drink. Would a real girl drink now? A wooden girl pretending to be a real one might, so you picked up your glass and pushed it against numb lips. Your numb face worked, your numb tongue stung, your numb throat swallowed.

Your belly wasn't numb. That burned, empty, and when the gin fumes rose up your throat you felt your face convulse into a grimace. Gin. You fucking hated gin. Why did you order it again?

Because the DJ was playing white boy rap--*the angel and the gin and the beast within fight to take control*--and the Boy in the mirror was staring and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

And because wooden girls went where the strings pulled them.

Conspiracy theories were inherently ridiculous. Until you were on the inside of a vast government cover-up, looking out. Then, you had to admit, they started to seem a little more reasonable.

Erik would have taken one step inside the door of this place and his lip would have curled in amused contempt. He would have died before ordering a drink here.

Died. You wished you would. Dead would be okay. Dead would mean you didn't have to maintain anymore. You wouldn't have to be sprightly or cute or sharp. You wouldn't have to live with the emptiness, the pain of abandonment you swore you would never let yourself feel again. You wouldn't have to toss in bed at night, chewing over the gnawing knowledge of connection, articulation, how the evidence inexorably fit together in ways even your baby bruddah couldn't see.

Or won't admit to himself that he can see.

The Boy staring at the back of your head was all about admitting he could see you. Wooden girl or not, you made a pretty puppet.

Reyes might understand. But if you could have told Reyes once, there was no way you could ever tell him now. He must have broken, when they had him, or they wouldn't have let him live. You had to operate on the assumption that he might be theirs now, and that he'd put you away for good if he even suspected you were onto the conspiracy. He was theirs, and you had to accept it. *Stay Alert. Trust no one. Keep your laser handy.*

And as long as he was theirs, and Chaz was his, there was nothing you could say to either of them. You could trust Duke--you thought--but Duke was working his own angles, and you didn't want to influence him. And you didn't want to lead *them* down on him if you got caught. So there was nothing you could say to anybody, except the boy--Notaboy--who wasn't there to hear it.

They got him. And if they *know you're on to them, they'll get you too.*

The eyes in the mirror hadn't wavered. If they were even the same set of eyes: you hadn't really been paying enough attention to be sure. It didn't matter. One Boy was just like another, and the boy--the Notaboy--that mattered wasn't about to walk through the door.

You must have drunk the gin fast, despite the fact that it tasted like Pine-Sol, because your glass was empty and the DJ was still stuck on that fucking Everlast: *The angel and the gin and the beast within say I'm gonna die.*

"Hit me," you said, and touched the glass. Gin, rocks, lime slid in front of you. Maybe you should have asked for tonic to kill the taste, but Pine-Sol was good enough for puppets.

Mama said love can't be trusted: it's just another weakness.

Strings pulled, you lifted the glass, feeling the ice click. You downed the drink, nose wrinkling just as before. You smiled through the mirror at the faceless eyes behind, watching him teeter on the edge of his decision. *Follow me, Boy.*

He started forward, and you watched him come.

(song lyrics from Everlast, "Mercy On My Soul" and "We're All Gonna Die")

Water Flowing Underground

Silver Spring, MD, February 2009

You can't get a decent chicken pot pie in the state of Maryland. Or at least not like Esther Falkner grew up with in St. Louis.

Even in the seventies, when the Jews and the Irish and the Blacks and, God help, the Italians still didn't have each other's kids over for supper, you picked up where you lived. Jenny Petrelli from two doors down still makes the Liebowitz family schnitzel, and Esther Falkner and her sister both can be bought and sold three times over with an authentic, gravy-and-peas, flaky-crust chicken pot pie.

Most of the year, it doesn't matter. The ATF's caseload doesn't leave a lot of time for cooking anything that's not out of a box, and Rebekah's been eating vegetarian since she came back from summer camp last August. Anything Bekk will do Deborah will do better or die trying, and it's impolitic to cook a meal neither of your children will eat when one's still too young for free rein with the stove. But today the kids are safely stashed at Ben's parents' for the traditional Quality Time and her administrative leave looks to drag on through the weekend, so Esther Falkner's driven down to the supermarket with the shopping list in her head, because she hasn't had a good chicken pot pie in forever.

The kosher poultry section is a blinding sea of squeaking saran-wrapped meat, bright-lit, almost reflective. A good place to sneak up on a person, what with the esoteric posture she has to accomplish just to bend over and get her hand down into the cooler properly. But habit is strong and too-recent experience stronger; she notices the man by the brisket pause oddly. Turn to watch her.

White, she notes, automatically. *Thirty-five to forty years old, works a blue-collar job.* No telling from inside the Safeway if he drives an American-made car.

That's all she gets through by the time he shuffles up to her and goes, "Esther?"

She blinks.

"Sorry," he says, licks his lips, starts again. Nerves, or performance anxiety; an average guy faced with the potential embarrassment of misrecognizing someone in a public place. Or an enemy combatant working themselves up to the kill.

She carefully gets the shopping cart between them and steps back from it, loose.

"It *is* Esther Liebowitz, right?"

And then she stops, and runs a reverse-aging program on the face, slimming its rough lines down into nothing in the back of her head until the profile hits a match. "Oh. Dave Feldman," she breathes out.

Aw, shit.

You didn't date at West Point. You didn't do anything that, even though nobody let you forget you were a woman, marked you out as a *girl*. So along with her Pixies and Sex Pistols tapes and the small cache of stud earrings that fit the second hole in her right ear, Esther Liebowitz left her high school boyfriend in storage in St. Louis and neglected to reassume the habit after graduation. It's an old guilt; the kind that's almost a comfort. *I should have written. I should have broken it off properly.* Home sweet home.

Old guilts are not supposed to resurface, five-o'-clock shadow and safety-pinned jacket, across multiple state lines.

"What're you doing here?" she asks. Rude question. Her mother and her drill sergeant both would make her drop and give 'em fifty.

He doesn't notice. His colour's still kind of high. "Isabel lives around the corner," he says. Izzy is his younger sister, last glimpsed circa 1984 applying for refugee status from *Flashdance*. "I'm visiting her and the kids. You?"

Her and the kids, Esther notes. No spouse there. And no way of knowing whether that's an *I'm sorry* or a *congratulations*. "I live here," she says.

He looks around, exaggerated. "Nice digs. Can't complain about the selection."

She almost swats him, playful, pure reflex. Back from those days when violence was something funnier. Her hand twitches and she keeps it firmly on the shopping cart. "Makes up for the parking, yeah."

"So, Maryland?"

"Yeah, we got out of DC after my oldest girl was born. That's...almost fifteen years now. Geez."

"What?" he says, half-smile.

"Fifteen years," she replies, and then she's smiling a bit too. "And you?"

"Still in St. Louis," he says. "Most of the time." He shifts feet, moving weight; people do that to move the topic, move themselves physically away from a conversation. "We should grab a coffee sometime. Izzy'd love to catch up too."

"Sure, yeah--" she fumbles in her purse, digs out a card and hands it over: Bureau e-mail address, Bureau phone number. He blinks at it, turns it over, back.

"So you never got out to Israel," he says, with a funny tinge to his voice.

Right. Dave Feldman. One of the few people who now knows, in her adult, neatly-organized life, that the most prestigious military academy in America was her second choice, the compromise. The thing she took so her parents could keep her safe in the continental US, where there weren't any war zones, until she quietly aged out of Mahal program eligibility.

She'd had the forms all the way up to her 21st birthday. They lived in a box under her bed, ready to go in case she finally snapped and decided to run away.

After her 21st birthday party, she'd taken them out back behind the barracks and burned them.

"No. Closest I got was Iraq," she says.

Apparently this was not the right thing to say.

"Well," he says. "I should get going."

She should too. Ben will be waiting at home to start supper, and St. Louis chicken pot pie takes at least two hours door to door.

His leather jacket creaks, and he's still head tilted, staring; studying her face.

"What?" she can't help asking.

"Nothing," he says, flips the card over in his hand. Pockets it. "Funny old world, that's all."

A full minute passes after they shake hands and go their separate ways - too many years have gone by for even an awkward hug - before Esther notices she's standing differently: one hip cocked out, weight on her right leg. Sassy. Provocative, like someone looking for a fight. Like a teenager. It hurts her back.

She straightens up.

It takes the rest of the browse through Poultry--Kosher, five minutes in the produce, one illicit trip to the cookies aisle and the full checkout experience to get back into herself; to slowly reassume those years of polish and manners and self-control, tuck herself tightly back into her own skin and zip it up after.

She hasn't said *geez* in fifteen years, either.

There's traffic on 495 on the way home. Falkner taps the steering wheel, steady and impatient, and tries to remember what it felt like when she had a leather jacket, when she spent mornings at yearbook meetings and evenings at track practice so she didn't have to spend either at home. When her life's ambition was to join the IDF, because fighting for the defense of safe places, fighting wars you could actually win with your hands and accompanying hardware seemed so much simpler than the accustomed kind.

When she walked like someone looking for a fight, someone who was always, always angry.

And if she's honest with herself? It wasn't West Point. It wasn't about being a girl. Esther Falkner has always been good at compartmentalization, and the plain cold fact of it is that when she left St. Louis, she put it, all of it, in a box so it would never touch her again.

The sunlight's slanting across her kitchen floor when she gets home, weighted down but lightly with brown paper grocery bags, and starts putting away her spoils. The house is quiet, an unaccustomed thing. She's rarely home when other people aren't.

"Woman!" Ben calls from the workshop. The smell of sawdust and back-of-the-throat, sweet furniture polish is leaking down the hall. "Where's my pot pie!"

"I fed it to my other boyfriend," she calls back. "He rubs my feet and buys me Uzis." She sounds tired. It's less funny when the girls aren't around to roll their eyes theatrically and sigh like put-upon dogs: *Mom and Dad are being weird again. Can't take 'em anywhere.*

No. Be honest. Right now that's just less funny.

"Bullshit," Ben crows. "I rub your feet." Something clanks in the workshop--hammer, probably--and then Ben comes out into the hallway, shoes shed and hair sweaty. "Did they have the little carrots?"

She passes him the little carrots. She should probably just turn state's evidence before he asks her what's wrong.

"Speaking of," she says. "Guess who I ran into at the store."

Ben bites into a carrot, even though they're for dinner, and crunches down. "Hmm?" he asks, around it.

And suddenly there's a lump in her throat. Why should this put a lump in her throat? "Dave Feldman. From St. Louis. Apparently his sister lives in town."

"Dave Feldman the one you dated in high school?" Ben asks, and puts the carrots down. Ben knows all the details of her mercifully few pre-Ben relationships. She knows all the nuances of his, recounted over odd sleepless nights in the first six months of their own. They met young enough that there wasn't much to tell.

They don't, with rare exceptions, keep each other in or away from boxes.

"Dave Feldman the very same," she replies.

"No wonder," he says.

"No wonder what?"

"You," he says, and drops a kiss somewhere in the vicinity of her mouth, "look like you either ran into someone from high school or a tactical nuke."

"A tactical nuke I could call someone for," she says, and opens the fridge for the pastry dough.

"So?" he asks.

"So," she says, fishes out the dough's mixing bowl, puts it down a touch too hard on the counter, "I can't even remember the person he was talking to. When I stopped being her. That's--"

A little scary.

"And you may ask yourself, how did you get here?" he says dryly.

She swats him in the chest with an oven mitt. He takes it like a man. "Stop making fun of me." She surprises herself with how plaintive it sounds.

"I'm not," he says, instantly serious, and gives her a squeeze with an arm that smells like cedar and warm skin. "Midlife crisis moment. We all get 'em." He pauses, wraps the other arm around her. Holds her there a few seconds. "Means I have you for another forty-two years."

There's still a lump in her throat. A different one.

"Wash up if you're in my kitchen," she says, a little fainter, and he bobs his head-- "As you wish," --before turning to the sink.

Maybe it's that simple. Maybe it isn't, she thinks, as Ben gets to work with the carrots and the dough warms up under its dishcloth and she picks out a good boning knife to deal with the chicken. Maybe there's something she ought to be paying attention to, there: who she was when she wasn't Mom, or Captain, or Supervisory Special Agent. When she wasn't this bundle of injuries and twitches and cautionary tales that's really all there is to a career officer. Who she was from the beginning, before all the other things got pasted on top.

"So," Ben says from the table, more tentative than before. "You going to see him while he's in town?"

She turns around. He's scraped the chopped carrots into a bowl, placed the knife careful on the cutting board. He's watching her, head tilted. Just watching.

"You're jealous," she says, surprised.

He shrugs. "Sometimes people miss the person they used to be."

She pictures walls crashing into each other, walls crumbling. Carefully mortared walls, built up over a lifetime. It makes her shiver. "No," she says. "I don't."

"Okay," he says, soft.

She breathes in, smells pastry dough and freshly chopped carrots. Breathes out. Picks out an onion, feeling its crackly skin shed into her hand. Dinner in two hours; good old St. Louis dinner.

No, she tells herself. Not its, not theirs, not someone else's. *Mine. This is my life and this thing I enjoy is part of it, and I am going to make and eat my pot pie with my husband in my home, which is also mine.*

She lets out a shaky breath.

"Ben?" she asks.

"Mm?"

"Turn on the oven, will you?"

His hand ghosts over her back on his way to the stove; a touch, firm and fleeting, reassurance.

They met young. She knows what he means, and she doesn't need to reply.

shadow unit

2.07 "Smoke & Mirrors" - by Elizabeth Bear

Deliver us unto each other, I pray. -- Dar Williams

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

The dream is smoke.

Smoke. Not fire. Not yet.

But you know the fire is coming.

Eyes sting, burn, shed water down your cheeks as if the heat has already burst their orbs. You couldn't be blinder if it had. Smoke, everywhere the smoke, burning your lungs when you sit up in bed, hands groping wide. Nothing there--the nightstand, the plastic cup, your glasses. You grab them, reflex. They don't help. Through the smoke, you can't even see the nightlight.

Your hand finds another hand in the dark.

You grab it, squeeze. It squeezes back.

The person in the other bed rasps, coughs, gets out words though they sound sandpapered. "The house is on fire. We have to get down on the floor."

The floor is dirty; things on the rug crunch into your knees. It's hot down here too, but you can almost breathe. Almost. You have to get out.

She locks you in at night. You can't get out by the door.

There's the window and the tree outside. The hand on your wrist tugs you that way. But there's so much heat. The floor sears your hands when you crawl off the rug, and the rug is softening under your knees. It's just cheap stuff, nylon, and you're pretty sure it's going to melt to your skin.

Your groping fingers find the wall. The hand slides off your wrist. You grab after it, but it's gone--

Glass shatters; wood cracks in the frame. A gush of--amazing--cool clear air.

"We have to jump!"

Yes. You have to jump. When you grab the window edge the shattered glass cuts your palms. You scramble up out of the heat, a hand on your hip steadying you. Better to jump than to burn. More cuts on bare feet as you draw them up onto the ledge.

You lean forward and kick off as you let go.

When you reach the ground, *you tell yourself*, you will remember that this is a nightmare, and you will wake up. You will wake up.

Now.

*

Arlington, VA, February 13, 2009

Chaz Villette jerked out of his second-oldest nightmare gasping silently, one arm thrown across his eyes and his back jammed into the corner where bed met wall. His mouth tasted of sour old metal. Each breath rattled him like shaken tin. It was five seconds at least before he could make himself roll across the bed and snake an arm to the nightstand.

His fingers brushed two pieces of cold, comforting metal and brought them back to the dark confines of the bed, where everything was outlined with green crispness by the glow of his digital alarm clock. 2:52 am.

He'd gotten in around ten, having stayed at work late to slam over some files of a potential anomaly in Miami. Bed around midnight-thirty, which meant he hadn't even made it through a single sleep cycle. And not a chance in hell that he'd be falling back asleep tonight, he thought as he married the magazine to the Sig.

He was going to be so much wasted flesh at work tomorrow. Today. Whatever.

It wasn't even *his* nightmare, exactly. Nothing to do with his experience. Just something he'd seen on the news when he was eight, a foster home that had burned down with everybody inside except the foster mom and two of the kids who'd jumped to safety.

He'd had nightmares about it for years anyway, and he'd quickly learned to have them silently. Feral animals, an online friend had told him once, didn't yell for help. They knew nobody was coming to the rescue.

There. He'd distracted himself enough that he could hear over his heartbeat, and what he heard wasn't anything out of the ordinary. He got up without turning on the light--dark was safer, and he knew where all the obstacles were--and padded into the living room, his gun low beside his thigh and his finger registered along the barrel. This space too was dark and still, a slight breeze moving across it from the rear window left propped open a couple of inches and wedged there with two heavy chocks--a compromise his paranoia accepted. Beyond it, silhouetted against the night by the security lights on the next-door building, he could see the hunched dark curve of a watchful cat's back. Muddy footprints marked the white window frame. She'd ducked inside to dodge the rain, but now she was back on duty.

Chaz breathed deeply, his sinuses filling up with the sweetness of just-past showers, the bitterness of unpoliced garbage, automobile smells from the street. None of it like anything burning.

If he hadn't interrupted the dream, it would have continued with fleeing the flames down burning streets of tinder-dry wooden houses--the sort Las Vegas had never had, but which he'd read of when school did the history unit on the San Francisco fire. The fire in his dream was malevolent, intelligent. It *wanted* him--and anything else it could get.

He turned away from the window. If there wasn't going to be any sleep, at least there could be some World of Warcraft. Somebody was always awake on Azeroth.

He put the Sig on the desk beside his laptop and didn't bother turning on the light before he flipped the computer open. While it booted, he rested his chin on his hands and watched the comforting display. It wasn't until his desktop--a photo of the platypus poster from Palace of Wonders--flickered up that he sat back and blinked.

"Oh," he said to his subconscious. "Is *that* what you were trying to tell me?"

*

Washington, DC, February 13, 2009

Solomon Todd occasionally made a virtue of insomnia by reporting to work at five a.m. Usually, he wandered in, made coffee, arranged himself comfortably at his desk and spent a few fruitful hours on the kind of meandering, dogged trudge through fifteen-year-old paper trails that he found satisfyingly like a jigsaw puzzle, and everybody else on the team hated with a divine and fiery passion. This particular day, a complex of emotions accompanied him down these familiar hallways at an hour even earlier than his wont. Even Celentano's office was still dark.

One more year, he thought, as his fingers brushed the cool metal of the door handle leading to the BAU's little corner of the Hoover Building. *Three hundred and eighty more days.*

Mandatory retirement was fifty-seven. He'd always been good at surfing the changes, leaving behind one stage of his life and moving on to the next without regret. *Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds*, and if Sol Todd loved anything, he loved learning new things, exploring new perspectives, understanding others and bringing their stories into the light.

He still felt a pang as he scanned his card right-handed and thought *there's one less time I'll do that*. He waited for the green light and the click of the lock, expecting nothing inside but quiet and dark. Down the Hall didn't disappoint; it was as deserted as a shopping mall in a zombie movie. But when he walked past Hafidha Gates's locked and darkened Sanctum Sanctorum, the aroma of coffee and the glare of fluorescents greeted him.

Chaz looked up from his desk as Todd entered the bullpen. "Somebody's in early."

"Somebody's got no room to talk," Todd countered. He tossed his keys on the desk, triggering a metallic rattle and an array of multicolored LEDs inside his devil duckie key fob. "Couldn't sleep?"

Chaz shrugged. The condition of his eyes, sunken and bloodshot in dark rings, would have invited comparison to piss holes in snow if Todd's professional pride hadn't balked at such an obvious metaphor.

Chaz said, "Who sleeps?"

"If you're going to misquote Spooky Mulder at me, I need a caffeine drip. Is that coffee I smell?"

That earned a tired grin. "There's also Danish. Happy birthday."

Of course Chaz remembered. "Ooo--"

"Don't get too excited," Chaz said, his head bending over piles of paper again. "It's Entenmann's. Any insomniac baking got derailed by a stroke of genius. I think I found our next case."

"Does that mean no birthday cake?" Todd made large eyes, basset-hound mournful, and was rewarded with a snort and a flash of shy grin.

"Have I ever failed you? We might have to eat it on the plane, however."

"Hold that thought." Todd didn't want to think about the plane just yet. He loved the office by night and early morning, quiet and spacious-seeming. And somehow leisurely, as if there might be time to get a few things done before the next crisis blew down the hall. He ducked into the kitchenette, where the raspberry Danish lay untouched in its box. Unlit birthday candles dotted the length, one every inch and a half, regular as if Chaz had measured. Which he had, after a fashion. Todd poured coffee, added milk, cut a slice.

He reappeared behind Chaz's chair with the latter wrapped in a napkin and balanced atop the cup containing the former. Leaning forward, he peered past Chaz's shoulder. "What did you find?"

"Those jumpers in Miami. The ones Reyes picked out from news reports. The mother and two daughters, and the banker and his wife."

"The ones who went off the balconies of their extremely expensive condos. High-rise syndrome in a somewhat unlikely pair of coincidences."

Chaz nodded. He didn't look up at the smell of Danish, but he was chain-smoking Chinese ginger candies, which was probably taking the edge off his hunger, his nausea, or both.

He said, "Well, I figured something out in the middle of the night."

He didn't say how, and Todd figured it would be much smarter to take a nice big bite of raspberry Danish than to ask. Thoughtfully, he brushed the crumbs off Chaz's shoulder.

"Nice," Chaz said, dripping sarcasm. "Your colleagues are not tables, Sol."

"Quit trying to draw out the suspense."

Chaz blew a stray lock of hair off his face. When he shook his head in disgust, it fell right back where it had been. Todd decided not to point that out.

"Here," he said, drawing over the floorplan maps of both condominiums. "I realized that there was some stuff that just didn't make sense for a suicide or a murder-suicide. Like the Wursthoff place--"

"--The one where she also killed the two daughters?"

"Yeah." Chaz glanced aside, mouth twisting.

Sol shook his head. He set the last two thirds of the Danish down on the edge of Chaz's desk, resting on its napkin. Maybe he'd want it later. "The innocent have nothing to fear," he intoned with bitter irony. "Nothing except the people they should most be able to rely on. Forget my interruptions. Tell me more."

"So there was a wet towel jammed under the front door. One more on the balcony. One fallen to the street with the victims. What does that suggest?"

"Muffle the girls' screams?"

"Maybe. *Maybe*. Except what gets you out of bed at four in the morning and makes you shake your two little girls awake and kill them and yourself? People do that under stress. They don't do it when they're happy, financially successful nonfiction writers who've chosen to conceive by donation. She *wanted* these kids."

"And the other victims?"

"James and Susan Calvin. Also white, middle-aged. Financially successful. James apparently jumped off his balcony in the middle of the night after throwing his pregnant wife over. No signs of struggle, nothing in the apartment in disarray. Just like the Wurstoffs. Except Calvin brought a pillowcase with him when he died. And the trauma from the fall wasn't enough to hide the friction abrasions--rug burns is the common term--on his and his wife's knees and shins."

Maybe it was the hour. Maybe it was the date. Maybe it was that he, Sol Todd, wasn't Chaz Villette or anything like him--but he wasn't picking up

Chaz's drift. He drank more coffee. "Meaning they were dragged to the balcony?"

"Duke." Chaz sounded horribly disappointed. "What is so terrible it makes you get down and crawl out of your apartment with a cloth held over your face, and then--after you've retreated to your point of last resort--fling yourself to certain death rather than face it?"

"Oh," Todd said. He set the coffee down beside the Danish, staying behind Chaz so Chaz would not see the tremors that had settled into his hands. Deep chills chased them. "But there's no evidence of fire in the condos--"

"Yeah," Chaz said, forcibly casual. "They only *thought* they were on fire."

*

When Stephen Reyes walked into the bullpen--his first cup of tea warming his palm, the left side of his jaw still numb with Novocain and the roughness of a temporary crown irritating to his tongue--he recognized the smell of conspiracy. The team, assembled around Villette's desk, glanced up like a pack of jackals surprised at a kill. Reyes breathed deeply, hiding a wince when the support strapping squeezed his ribs, and scaled the wall of their disapproval as he approached.

The body language was tight, closed, all around: Brady with crossed arms, Falkner frowning, Lau bent so her upper body half-vanished behind Brady. Worth and Hafidha radiated hostility like small angry suns, but that was only to be expected.

They'd cheerfully saved his life, but they were all still pretty mad at him. Only Todd looked halfway welcoming, and for him that was a professional skill.

"You're lying in ambush," Reyes said lightly. While waiting for them to assemble their tactics he sipped his tea, paying attention so it wouldn't dribble off his numb lip.

To his surprise, Villette stood up, stepped around Hafidha, and reached between Falkner and Brady to extend a file folder. Reyes wondered if the rest of the team had noticed that they'd formed up around him in a protective ring. Villette certainly did, but he was choosing to ignore it--to breach it--rather than acknowledge it with any apparent discomfort.

He was making an effort. An effort Reyes still wasn't certain he deserved.

If it comes down to a fight for this team, right now--you would lose it. Even Todd would side against him.

Sometimes unpopularity was the price of making the decisions you felt you had to make. Sometimes, you made the wrong decisions for the right reasons. Sometimes, you were just wrong.

Sometimes you were right all along, and didn't find it out until much later.

The questions were always more important than the answers, anyway. The trick lay in finding the right questions to ask, in sorting the signal from the noise. In finding the patterns. Which was the thing Villette was better at that anyone. Better than Reyes.

The problem was, they were both too damned close to the data, and too invested in hoping that some of the answers were wrong.

As Reyes let the folder slide into his free hand, Villette cleared his throat, avoided eye contact, and said, "You were correct."

"About?" He could see already, but if Villette was actually initiating a conversation he wanted to accept the overture and keep it moving. The relationship had to be rebuilt somehow; paperwork could be as good a foundation stone as any. And he couldn't keep letting Villette make the gestures.

"Miami," Villette said. "Sol and I want to go. We think it might be something. We think we know the manifestation, or at least have the beginnings of a typology."

Reyes looked at him, at Todd. At the rest of them, arrayed like a panel of unhappy thesis advisors. At the evidence of anomalous activity verified by two of his team. "What's he doing to them?"

Now Villette met his eyes. "We think he's making them see fire where there isn't any."

Demonstrate trust. Reinforce his judgment. Provide support.

"Right," Reyes said. "Lau, you think you can wrangle us an invitation to aid in the investigation?"

She snapped forward, relieved to be given a task. Villette wasn't the only team member at the end of his rope, or the only one who needed to be needed.

"I know a local homicide detective," she said. "I'll see who caught the Wursthoff case. Miami P.D.'s not real hot on the Department of Justice right now--we just filed against two of their own for corruption last May. It'll take just a second to make the call--"

Todd shook his head. "You know, that's an expression I never understood. Your whole life can change in a second. Can *end* in a second."

Lau, interrupted mid-thought, turned to stare. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"People say *just* a second. But the thing is, a second is a long time." He shrugged, palms up, making Reyes wonder what exactly he'd been playing at.

Lau seemed to accept it as just another manifestation of the mystery that was Solomon Todd, and stepped around him to head for her desk and her telephone.

"Who do you want on it?" Falkner had a magic trick of seeming to step forward without ever moving her body.

"Hostile police department," Reyes said. "In a heavily black and Latino city. We'll keep a light presence until we have more to go on. Villette and Todd, to start. They figured it out--"

"Chaz figured it out," Todd said.

Villette elbowed him, a blow that landed on Todd's shoulder due to the difference in heights. Todd looked unrepentant.

"And me," Reyes said, steeling himself for the quickly concealed expressions of dismay. "You may need a Spanish speaker. And I've been on duty for two weeks, and already missed one adventure. It's time I got back on the horse." He caught each eye in turn, waiting until Hafidha pursed her lips and nodded before finishing, "Todd and Villette, go get some rest. You both look like you've been up all night, and we can't leave until Lau gets us our traveling papers."

*

Chaz's go bag was in his desk. Between that and the backpack with his laptop and a 12-hour supply of Clif bars, he figured he was ready. Lau would get them the invitation and they'd be on the plane by dinnertime. The logical thing to do was just head to Dulles now and sack out on one of the couches in the Gulfstream. He slept better there than in his own bed.

The solution satisfied him, and he moved forward on it, pausing only to fill his lidless travel mug. But as he was passing down the hall towards Down the Hall, and eventually the building exit, Hafidha emerged from her lair like a trap-door spider and touched his arm. Because it was Hafidha, the casual contact didn't send his heart rate through the roof, but he still flinched, and hot coffee spilled over the backs of his fingers. "Yipe. Careful, that could have been a nasty accident."

"Nothing in this world happens by accident, baby bruddah," she said, with a pained turn of her head. Her portentous tone meant it had to be a joke, but her body language said otherwise. Before he could ask, she pulled back her hand.

"I won't see you until you come home," she said. "Don't leave just yet. I have something for you. Stay right there."

Bemused, he stayed, sweating into the handle of his go bag. He threw the strap over his shoulder beside the backpack strap, and that was better. He could switch the travel mug from one hand to the other, dry his palms on his cords, and listen to her rummaging in her office while he tried to pretend he didn't hate surprises.

When Hafs reappeared, she had both hands behind her back, and was tilting her head to look up at him over the tops of her glasses, through the eyelashes.

"Close your eyes and hold out your hand," she said.

He obeyed, though standing there in the middle of the corridor with his back exposed to the bullpen and his eyes closed made his calf muscles tremble with suppressed adrenaline.

Hafidha tapped the back of his hand. "No, doofus, palm up. Hasn't anyone ever given you a surprise before?"

The silence dragged, because he thought it better if he didn't answer. And because after a moment, she figured it out and let the question drop.

The tension hurt too much. He broke it to say, "This had better not be disgusting," just a second before something heavy, smooth, and cool settled into his palm.

Hafidha curled his fingers closed over it--*don't drop it, honey*--and he felt something crinkle. "Count ten seconds and open 'em."

He felt the empty space beside him as she stepped away, counted, opened his eyes. She was just disappearing through the computer room door, which shut behind her softly until the latch clicked. He wondered what she'd been doing for nine seconds. Possibly just watching him to make sure he followed orders.

He looked down. In his palm lay a dark chocolate espresso truffle in a gold paper cup, flavor identifiable by its rich scent and the oily black-brown bean adorning its lustrous dome.

Under the cup, when he lifted it, rested a gold pocket watch. The engraving on it was art deco, restrained. A gold watch fob coiled around it, slipping between his fingers when he moved incautiously. The watch was an antique. It had somebody else's initials on it. It was big enough not to get lost in his hand.

He looked again at the truffle in his left hand. At his shirt sleeve, buttoned down close over the wrist where he used to wear a succession of gadget-laden wristwatches. *I must be the only person in the universe who has to be bribed to accept a present.*

But of course, she knew that.

Act II

Miami, FL, February 13, 2009

It was past nightfall when they arrived at the Miami Police Department, and Todd was grateful for the elapsed time. Reyes was breathing decently and Chaz looked better too. The kid had taken his jump bag to the airport and crashed on the Gulfstream until it was time to lift. Todd should have done the same.

The P.D. was a rectangular, cantilevered dirty-white building that looked like a flattened, inverted wedding cake--each tier larger than the one below. Rows of black windows set at a forty-five degree outward angle striped it horizontally. It looked even uglier in the cement than it did on TV, which was saying something.

Chaz, in the front passenger seat, stared out the windshield at it as Reyes pulled the car past. "It looks like a college library from the '60s."

"That too," Todd said from the back seat, earning a curious glance over Chaz's shoulder. At least he was interacting, reaching out of himself more than he had before the team came back from Missouri. Solid case, worked hard to a clean ending. Or as clean as it ever got with five dead, not counting the gamma. And even the two in January hadn't shaken that. Hope Mitchell's death wasn't on them, and neither were the deaths of the BAU agents and EMTs she'd killed, though Daphne was taking it hard. And the thing in Portland had been a mess, but it hadn't been their mess, and Hafidha and Falkner had handled the cleanup damned well.

Todd hoped Chaz would ask, but instead he shrugged, snagged his travel mug out of the cup holder between his seat and Reyes's, and opened his door before Reyes killed the engine. Chaz unfolded like a time-lapse film of a sprouting sunflower, touched the butt of his pistol, swung his leather backpack onto one shoulder, and was ambling away across the parking lot before Todd or Reyes made it out of the car.

Todd shut the rear passenger door behind him, Reyes at his elbow. Reyes chirped the car, looked after Chaz's retreating back, and sighed.

"You know," Todd said aside to Reyes, "Hafidha, Lau, and I all speak Spanish."

The look Reyes shot him was flat and unreadable. "And I suppose one of you is Cuban?"

Todd smiled. "If I noticed, Chaz noticed," he said--and set off in pursuit of the object of discussion, who was shrinking rapidly into the distance.

By the time Todd and Reyes caught up, Chaz was reaching forward over an information desk, offering his gold badge and ID to the uniformed officer behind it. "Special Agent Charles Villette," he said. "And Supervisory Special Agents Todd and Reyes," he added, as Todd and Reyes respectively

drew up at his heels, their badge folders extended. "We're here to see Sergeant De Los Santos. We're expected."

The officer behind the counter was a big man with a regulation black moustache stretching between reddened slabs of cheek. The name tag opposite his palm-tree emblazoned badge read "Miles." He glanced at each of them, examined their folders, and picked up his phone. There must have been a list of phone extensions under the overhang of his desk, because he ran a finger down it before he dialed.

"Sergeant? You have three Feds in the lobby. Do you know about this?" Whatever the phone said in his ear, he nodded at it, then rolled his eyes as he caught himself and said, "Thanks. Right, I'll tell them." He hung up, and turned back to Chaz. "He'll meet you by the metal detectors in five minutes and show you up. If you wouldn't mind waiting just over there?"

*

Inocencio De Los Santos was a round-cheeked, fortyish Latino man with a moustache, bifocals, and an expectant hound-dog expression that didn't have far to fall when he realized Lau wasn't with them. Still, De Los Santos shook hands all around and managed to mostly not peer past shoulders too obviously while checking to see if the pretty woman was maybe just briefly misfiled and might be arriving at any moment.

She's magic, Chaz thought. *Trust me, man. I sympathize.*

Sergeant De Los Santos led them through crowded corridors to a homicide squadroom that bore an eerie resemblance to the WTF bullpen, if Chaz ignored the color choices and the fact that a lot more people worked in these cluttered confines. But the center of the room was dominated by clusters of half-height gray cubes--four to a group rather than two, and smaller than the WTF cubes. Each one boasted a flat-panel monitor resting on a laminate desktop in unfortunate dried-blood burgundy, surrounded by whatever personal effects the detective in question had crammed into his or her space.

Chaz was pretty sure a baseline wouldn't have noticed Reyes limping, but the pattern of his stride was different, and Chaz couldn't help but be aware. If he wasn't careful, the mirror would give him flashes of the Old Man's aches and stiffness, the nagging throb in his jaw, the itch of the scars drawing a false part through his receding hairline. But Chaz didn't need the mirror for

sympathy: the allegedly pleasant scent of Mederma and his own infinitely detailed memory handled that.

They walked in past a wall-height whiteboard covered top to bottom with cases written in a neat format--victim's name, detective's name, columns for the status of the case. Chaz noticed in passing that the name Calvin did not appear, and while the two younger Wurstoffs--Emily and Celia--had been written in with De Los Santos' name beside them, there wasn't a lot of evidence that the case was being worked aggressively. Which--Chaz had to admit, craning his neck back to read the names up beneath the ceiling--was understandable, given the workload and the fact that this one seemed to be a cut and dried incident of parental murder-suicide.

But De Los Santos wasn't acting as if he was offended at their presence or even wary of it, though hostile gazes settled on them from around the bullpen. Instead, he chattered away to Todd as he led them to his desk, where he bent over the keyboard and unlocked his screen saver one-handed. Chaz noticed a picture of a pretty dark-haired woman bracketed by two teenaged boys beside the keyboard. One, taller than his mother--if she was his mother--rested an arm on her shoulder and smiled. The other stood tucked into the curve of her arm. All three wore red--a scarlet sweater on the mother, a burgundy button-down on the older boy, a rugby-striped collared shirt on the younger.

Reyes, noticing them at the same time Chaz did, said something fluid and completely--to Chaz--incomprehensible, in a cheerfully questioning tone. De Los Santos' mouth curved up when he turned to glance at the picture. "No, I'm divorced. That's my sister Milagra and her boys."

Ouch, Chaz thought. *Your father had a sense of humor.* He knew why Reyes had switched to Spanish, and he also appreciated that De Los Santos had recognized the gesture for what it was and re-included the others. Or Chaz, anyway, as he was pretty sure Todd had followed.

Really gotta fix that, he thought, then told himself, *Add it to the list.*

De Los Santos was still speaking. "We'll get you guys set up in a spare office before we call it a night. Although I'm confused about what you think you're going to find here. The department thinks it's a clear murder-suicide. You think you've got a serial killer tossing people off balconies?"

Reyes smiled and shunted the question to Chaz with a gesture, leaving Chaz stammering with unpreparedness. He took a breath, shook it off, and made himself look De Los Santos in the eye--a task made easier when De Los Santos spun his chair around and dropped into it so he was looking up at Chaz.

Argh, Chaz thought, and squared himself up to De Los Santos' chair. "Okay, well. First off, the suicide rate in Miami is half that of the nearby rural counties, despite the fact that Miami was recently ranked the second most stressful city in the U.S. By contrast, Las Vegas has a much steeper annual suicide rate--higher than one per 1900 residents--despite being ranked only fourth on the same stress list."

De Los Santos blinked at him. "Why's that?"

"Why's it ranked lower?"

"Why's the suicide rate so high?"

Chaz nodded. He'd gotten himself tangled in a flood of badly linearized data without apparent logical connections yet again. "Nobody wants to admit it's gambling. But Atlantic City is also off the charts. Anyway, back to the deaths. There are few data on suicidal falls. It's not a widely studied area. But we do know that despite the reputation of certain landmarks as suicide magnets, most suicides by jumping occur from residential high-rises. That's not what's atypical. What's atypical is that--"

"Mary Wurstoff had no reason at all to commit suicide."

"Exactly," Chaz said, with a smile for De Los Santos that he hoped did not quite ooze relief for the bailout. "And we think you have another recent case--that of the Calvins--which demonstrates some striking correlations both in the victimology and description of the scene. Again, no reason for a murder-suicide, no signs of a struggle--"

"Approximately twenty percent of deaths of pregnant women are homicide by the father of the child. Open and shut, right?"

Chaz halted with his mouth half-open to offer the same statistic, raising his eyebrows at De Los Santos.

"They cleared that case in sixteen hours." De Los Santos shook his head.

Chaz noticed the brief, protective gesture of his right hand toward the photo frame. "Which is why you're still working the Wurstoff murders, isn't it? You said the department thinks it's clearly a suicide. Meaning you don't?"

"Twins. The wife in that first case--Susan Calvin--was pregnant with twins. And Emily and Celia Wurstoff were twins." De Los Santos pursed his lips. "Let's just say that after I caught this one, I noticed some striking correlations too. So when Nikki called and said you folks were interested, I said sure, come on down. It's not like you're going to hurt my clearance rate if you *have* got something here. So I guess that's an Anomalous Crime, is it? Something that just sits funny?"

"Sometimes," Reyes agreed. "We'd like to get a start tonight, if we can. Our technical analyst in DC--Hafidha Gates--will need computer access. She'll be searching for previously overlooked similar cases. Often in anomalous crimes, we find that there's an existing pattern. And the three of us would like to start by visiting the crime scenes."

"The Calvin apartment has been released. It's not going to trial. But I don't think the unit's been cleared by their families yet. They're--" De Los Santos shrugged. *The families are not getting along too well*. "Wurstoff is easier--we're only about four days out on that one and I haven't let them close it. We should do Calvin first, I guess, while there's a chance the family will be available to admit us. Are you gents ready to roll?"

"Born ready," Todd said, as De Los Santos levered himself out of his chair.

Chaz stepped back, happy to let Reyes and Todd take the limelight again, and slid his hand into his pocket to feel the warm shape of his new pocket watch. It ticked against his palm. Ridiculous to find it so comforting. And yet, there it was.

Proof somebody loved him.

*

"Two sets of twins!"

Chaz's voice echoed against the hard wood and metal surfaces of the rising elevator. When Todd turned to him, he was already blushing through his winter-sallow complexion. De Los Santos and Reyes had swiveled too, and now all three blinked at him, waiting for the elaboration.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to shout."

"Two sets of twins." The elevator door glided open. Todd thought of his own twin, and wondered how she was spending his half of their collective two-day birthday.

Back in Miami, he celebrated by stepping out into a pleasant, carpeted corridor illuminated by recessed ceiling lights and a window at the end. It looked as if it would open on a crank in the spring months, to let the breeze blow in, but currently it was shut and no handle was in evidence.

"Right," Chaz said. "Two sets of twins, affluent older mothers, and we know one of them conceived by artificial insemination. That suggests that there might be a medical intervention involved in the Calvin pregnancy as well."

"Susan Calvin's mother said she and James had been trying for several years," De Los Santos volunteered. "I'd say that's a pretty solid hunch, Agent Villette."

Reyes had drawn away while they slowed to chat. Todd lengthened his stride to catch up, De Los Santos and Chaz closing the distance easily. "Are we going to meet the mother tonight?" Reyes asked, as De Los Santos brushed past him to raise his right hand to the door.

"Sister," De Los Santos said, rapping firmly. A beat cop's knock, unhesitating and charged with authority. "Tracy Genoese. Trust me, she's the one you'd want to deal-- Hello, Tracy," he continued smoothly, when the door swung open. "These are the federal agents I told you about, the ones who would like to look around your sister's apartment."

Todd looked at Reyes, who had just turned to shoot him a matching glance. Nothing they could do about the compromised scene now, of course, and the family had probably been in and out multiple times since the apartment was released. Accepting the reality of the situation didn't make Todd any happier about it.

"Of course," she said, and closed the door long enough to take the chain off the slide.

Tracy Genoese was brown-haired, a wide-hipped woman with an expensive tan and a tendency to hold her elbows cupped in her opposite palms. She was doing it as she led them into the Calvin's spacious and graciously-

appointed quarters. Todd recognized the touch of a professional decorator in the disposition of furniture around an airy living room, the placement of potted fan palms--now curling with neglect--on either side of the sliding door that lead out to a wide balcony. A white and gold rug covered the center of the pale tile floor, conversation-group furniture set about it in a calculatedly asymmetrical manner. A flatscreen television dominated the far wall, hanging over a credenza littered with small stacks of DVD boxes.

De Los Santos introduced them all briefly, Genoese nodding in response to each name. "The bedroom is through here," she said, pointing with her chin. "I'm going to wait in the kitchen if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," De Los Santos said. "Before you go--this looks like you haven't changed much."

"We haven't touched it," she said, as she was turning away. "It's going to be all lawyers all the time, I guess. Like this... this *stuff* matters."

She vanished through the kitchen doorway. A moment later, Todd heard the rasp as she pulled out a chair, and watched Chaz crane his head for a peek into the room she'd entered.

Chaz nodded, as if something he saw had satisfied his curiosity. He moved to the center of the living room and stood there, rotating in place like a fire sentry on a watch tower, taking in the layout.

"She wasn't lying," he said. "Somebody threw out a couple of vases of flowers from that credenza and a box of delivery produce that was on the kitchen table, but everything else is unchanged."

"You know that without comparing the scene photos?" De Los Santos crossed the living room to the balcony door and stood looking out it.

"I went over them on the plane," Chaz said. "I guess it's okay if we move stuff now-- Reyes?"

Reyes was disappearing into the hall that Genoese had indicated as leading to the bedroom. Todd, with a glance over his shoulder, followed, Chaz and De Los Santos on his heels. When they entered the bedroom, they found Reyes lying on his back atop the flowered counterpane, his head on a dead man's pillow and his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Something wakes you in the middle of the night," he said. "You sit up" -- suiting actions to words, one hand pressing his shirt against his ribs-- "turn on the light, shove your arms into your robe and don't tie it very well. Then you reach over and shake your wife awake."

"James Calvin's bedside lamp was overturned," Chaz said. Gently, he reached past Reyes and tipped it over, tilting the shade. "The switch was on."

A *click*, as his bony fingers recreated the scene. He stepped back, clearing some distance between himself and Reyes.

"James Calvin wasn't wearing his robe," Todd said. "Susan was. Just the robe--a man's robe, too large for her--and nothing else. Calvin was wearing boxer shorts."

Scooby-Doo boxer shorts, in the photos. Todd wondered if he'd have been a good father.

Todd had seen Chaz's hands clench and slide into his pockets when they'd walked past a second bedroom down the hall, already set up as a nursery, the wainscoting topped by a wall runner bright with yellow and green teddy bears. If anticipatory buying were a sign of desire, these had been badly wanted babies.

And now they were dead.

And here he was, wishing there was something he could do to make this easier for a coworker, when he ought to be solving the case. Mind on your work, Todd.

"So if you're dragging your pregnant wife down the hall to toss her off a balcony," De Los Santos said, "Do you stop and put your robe on her?"

"Sergeant," Reyes said. "Do you know if Susan Calvin habitually slept in the nude?"

"Her sister might," De Los Santos answered, and vanished back down the hall.

He reappeared less than thirty seconds later. "According to Genoese, yes. I also asked what she could confirm about fertility treatments, and she said, and I quote, 'Shots in the ass and the whole nine yards.'"

"Shit," Chaz said under his breath, making Todd wonder just what exactly about that aspect of the case was hitting him so hard. Todd could speculate. But there were still a lot of ways that story could play out, and he wasn't sure yet that he wanted to commit to a narrative arc.

De Los Santos paused, scratched at his cheek, and said, "Toxicology on both of them was negative."

Chaz raised his eyebrows. "You have a gift for cutting out the inessential layers of the conversation, Sergeant."

De Los Santos winked. "Explains why I'm divorced. So what do you think happened?"

In lieu of an answer, Reyes rolled over and whisked down the counterpane on what would have been the wife's side of the bed. A pile of down pillows was revealed, the topmost one stripped of its case and lying naked.

"It was Susan's pillowcase that wound up on the ground," Todd said.

De Los Santos made a face. "If you're going to whip a pillowcase over somebody's face to blindfold them, you probably don't pull it out from under their head."

"Sounds like we have some agreement that we're not talking about a murder-suicide," Reyes said. "So you roll out of bed, hand your wife the first protective garment you find, and crawl to the living room."

"Open plan. There's no bedroom door," Chaz said, unwrapping a Clif bar while De Los Santos shot him a slightly incredulous sidelong glance.

Oblivious--or pretending--Chaz turned to survey the hallway. It would have been a long crawl. He finished, "So you don't check for heat."

"Why would you check for heat if there's no sign of fire?" De Los Santos craned his neck around, trying to catch someone's eye.

Todd and Chaz let Reyes be the one to offer the connection. Reyes rose to it. "That would also be one of the things we mean when we say, 'anomalous.'"

De Los Santos stared at them hard, sucking his lips against his teeth unattractively. "Sheeit," he said. "You guys are the X-Files, aren't you?"

Todd patted him on the shoulder. "Please," he said. "David Duchovny *wishes* he looked this good in a suit. Come on. Let's talk to Mrs. Genoese, and then we can get on to the next tomb of beautifully decorated horrors."

"Can we get some food on the way?" Chaz asked, sliding the empty candy wrapper into his pocket. "I'm ready to eat the scene photos."

*

When Reyes entered the kitchen, he found Tracy Genoese sitting in a straight-backed chair in the dining nook, tapping away at a palmtop with every pretense of absorption. She didn't look up as he walked across the parquet flooring, just moved her little plastic stylus with ever crisper efficiency, as if by ignoring his presence she could revise out of existence the terrible course of events that had brought him here.

He went to the sink, took down a glass from the obvious-choice cupboard over it, and turned on the filter before he let the water run. It wasn't what you did at a crime scene, but this wasn't a crime scene any more, and it was more important to establish a connection with Genoese.

She didn't speak until he came back to the table, the water glass damp in his hand. "There's an icewater thing on the fridge door."

"Hurts my teeth if it's too cold," he answered. He took a sip of tapwater. "Would *you* like some?"

She shook her head. Without looking up, she shut down the P.D.A. and slid the stylus back into the case, then squared the machine on the tabletop before her with the flats of her hands. "No, thank you. Would you care to sit, Agent Reyes?"

She gestured to the other chair that looked habitually used. James's chair, Reyes thought, as he set his water before it, then slid it gently across the floor. He settled himself and leaned forward, hands open and flat on the table, shoulders down. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said.

She looked up, but not at him. Past him, rather, her eyes rising until they came to rest on the ceiling. "I keep telling myself it will stop hurting so much eventually," she said. "But James--how could he--? I liked him. I *introduced* them, Agent Reyes. And he-- oh, *shit*."

She was a proud woman. She didn't hide her face in her hands, just looked right at Reyes, tears and all, as if wondering if maybe he had the answer.

You didn't reach out and take the survivor's hand. You didn't say *Maybe he didn't*. You didn't express doubt about the outcome of a closed case. It was cruel and unnecessary and an abuse of authority, and it could turn back around to bite you faster than a rattlesnake.

"You didn't kill your sister," Reyes said. "Don't try to carry that, Mrs. Genoese."

"Doctor," she said, and bit the inside of her cheek. "Doctor Genoese. Could you call me Tracy? I prefer it."

"I can call you Dr. Genoese," he offered, with a self-deprecating tilt of his head. *Just a professional relationship, ma'am.*

Her sniffle was audible, but it lead to a watery sort of grin, which he returned with a shrug that said *What can you do?* Reyes took a sip of his water, found it tasteless from filtration. "What are you a doctor of, Dr. Genoese?"

"Ph.D. Pharmacology. I'm on the faculty at UM. I just--you know they say this sort of thing can happen in any family, that nobody's immune. But you think your family is nice people, is good people...."

"Sometimes," Reyes said, "there isn't anything you could have done to change it. Sometimes you do everything right and lightning strikes. Can you always predict how a particular drug is going to interact with a particular patient?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. It's a combination of genetics, environmental factors, and just plain dumb luck."

"So is something like this," Reyes said. "You can't accept blame, Dr. Genoese. You did not cause this to happen."

"I think I would like that water."

Silently, Reyes pushed his chair back, retrieved another glass, and filled it under the frigid stream that squirted from the refrigerator dispenser. He slid it in front of Genoese before resuming his seat.

She didn't drink. Instead, she wrapped both hands around the chunky glass and pressed it against her forehead and the bridge of her nose, eyes closing. "Thank you, Agent Reyes."

"Doctor," he said, and winked when she glanced up at him, the jerky movement spilling water droplets across her knuckles.

"And what are you a doctor of?"

"Psychology," he admitted.

It was always an uneasy feeling to know that somebody else was profiling you. But it was there in her clear assessing gaze as she set the water down, then rubbed her face with wet cold palms. "And you grew up to be a cop? That's a change in direction."

"I had a difference of opinion with... *tenured* faculty." When she didn't drop her gaze, he shrugged. "I like what I do now. May I ask a few more things about your sister?"

An awkward subject change, but his obvious discomfort had made them allies. Genoese sipped water and nodded. "What do you need to know?"

Kudos to De Los Santos, Reyes thought. When he'd said *This is the one you want to talk to*, he'd been perfectly accurate.

"Before she died, did she say anything to you at all about anything--no matter how slight--that seemed creepy? Or odd? Or out of the ordinary? Any unusual contacts or encounters? Old friends turning up out of the blue?"

Genoese shook her head, but it was a thinking shake. "Not off--oh. Wait. Somebody was sending her adoption flyers."

"*Adoption* flyers?"

"Brochures. For adoption agencies. Some for abortion clinics. In the mail, tucked under her car windshield. We figured it was somebody at work who resented her pregnancy, because she got one batch in interoffice mail. Like anybody who worked as hard as she did to get pregnant was going to give up a child."

Reyes felt the cold tingle start across the nape of his neck and tried to quell it. Hunches were not good cop work. You could get way too invested in a

theory before all the facts were in. "I don't suppose you--she--kept any of them? Or remember what agency they were from?"

"All different ones." Genoese picked up her water glass again, and this time she drank from it. "I remember that because she remarked on it at the time."

Act III

Behind the bright seal on the door, the Wurstoff's apartment was more of the same. The forty-three glass droplets in the square crystal vase beside the door came from Crate and Barrel, not Pier 1. The furnishings in the girls' room were pink and white, and meant to be grown into.

Chaz got through the scene visit on gritted teeth and ujjayi breathing, blessing his massage therapist for recommending he take up yoga to help restore flexibility. It turned out that the learned ability to stay in the moment was handy in more ways than one, and cyclical, meditative breathing helped with the panic attacks. Or maybe it was just the extra oxygenation.

Not that he had any intention--anymore--of fathering any children of his own. But nothing clarified your desire for something like realizing you couldn't have it. As soon as he'd become absolutely certain of what he was doing, and the reasons for it, he'd realized he'd always thought someday--maybe before too much longer--he'd get a chance to be a dad. And that maybe he'd do an okay job of it.

Part of the healing process was making things right for somebody else, after all.

But there was no way in hell he was perpetuating William Villette's DNA. So, good to have it clear in your head what you were walking away from when you decided to walk away from it. Thanks, brain, for being so upfront about it. He'd listed it under *things you can't have* and gotten Daphne to drive him in for the outpatient appointment.

Are you sure about this? she'd said in the car, the only thing she'd said at all, other than *Whatever you need, kiddo.*

He'd winked at her and put on his best cheerful voice and answered, *Remember to spay or neuter your beta*, and made a joke about a hot date with an icepack, and that had been the end of it. Whatever she thought,

however much she guessed, she'd just bitten her lip and nodded and--even though he could see she wanted to--she hadn't tried to talk him out of it, which was why she was the person he'd chosen to tell.

But he thought he had some idea how desperately a parent-in-waiting could want a child, if it was anything like the way a child could want a parent. And he could imagine wanting a child that badly himself, one of these years. Badly enough to spend money, time, resources--

Reyes was staring at him.

Chaz tried to find something intelligent to say about the crime scene, but he had nothing. He was just about to stammer something lame about the line of movement from the bedrooms to the big plate glass sliding doors when--as if it knew he needed saving--his Adorable Overhyped Phone sang. He slid it from his pocket and silenced the twenty-second clip of "Merry Go Round Broke Down," then put it to his ear.

The Loony Tunes theme alone dropped his blood pressure ten points. Hafs' voice following was like a stiff drink and a shoulder massage rolled into one, combining courage with a sense of well-being.

"Wascally wabbit," he said, speaking softly so De Los Santos wouldn't overhear. "I love the pocket watch, by the way."

"Of course you do," she scoffed. "You got it from me, didn't you? Hey, are El Supremo and the Duke of Earl around? I have beta."

"When did you start picking up climbing slang?" he asked, setting the phone to speaker. "Reyes, Todd. Hafidha's got something."

"Four somethings," she said. "Alicia Post and family--husband, two infant girls, October of 2007. Same pattern."

"I remember that," De Los Santos said. "That was in this neighborhood, more or less."

"Like the two more recent ones," Tod said. "Well, that tells us something. Twins. And not just twins."

"Girls," Chaz said. "That's a scary specific victimology. And a tight geographic profile. We can do something with this. Hafs, do you happen to know if the Post children were naturally conceived?"

"I can find out for you, babycakes," she said. "But wait! There's more. If you order now you also get this free addition to your victim profiles. The Posts were affluent, well-educated... and *black*."

"Hello," Reyes said. "Okay, that's really useful. Our UNSUB is willing to wait months if necessary to find just the right target. He's a stalker, and he's very picky. The victims have to be *just* right. And race isn't a consideration?"

"Sharp," Todd said.

Reyes continued as if he hadn't heard him. "Hafidha, I need you to run down all three families and see if their twins were conceived through some sort of fertility clinic, or if the families shared a doctor, especially a pediatrician or an OB/GYN. Also, from something Tracy Genoese said, there's a possibility that the UNSUB located them through an adoption agency. Could you check and see if any of the couples had registered to adopt before they managed to conceive? I also need you to find out if there are any other sets of twins, especially female twins, in this neighborhood. Maybe we can get ahead of him."

The glitter of the chase was in his eyes. Chaz felt it too, the burn of adrenaline that--counterintuitively--calmed and focused.

Hafidha said, "Age range? We're looking for babies?"

"Age range unborn, in the case of the Calvins. But if you're having twins--"

"You tell everybody," Todd said. "You can't shut up about it. Especially if you've been trying hard, for a long time. Unless you go the other way and get superstitious."

"Right," Hafidha said. "I'll get on it. I'll also start looking for survivors of catastrophic fires. The mythology has to come from somewhere. Anything else?"

"Tell Brady he's coming to join us."

"Boys' club?" Todd interjected.

Reyes ignored him. "Otherwise, that'll do for now. Villette, I want you to head back to the PD and work the victimology and the geographic profile. See if you can support Hafidha in looking for other potential victims."

"Right," Chaz said. "You and Todd are going to talk to the families."

"Joy," Todd said. "Can't we have Hafidha send Lau as well?"

*

Miami, FL, February 14, 2009

The night burned into what was only morning by courtesy while Chaz hunched over his laptop in the conference room De Los Santos had secured for the WTF team. A timer in the corner of the screen reminded him to put calories into his body every thirty minutes, but the beep of the alarm contributed his only real awareness of the passage of time, and its cyclical nature tended to abrogate any grounding effect. So when the door swung open and Brady stomped through it, black nylon jump bag slung over his shoulder and his eyes red-rimmed from the late night flight, Chaz couldn't gather himself to do more than stare for several seconds.

"Coooffeeee," Brady said, drawing it out like the living dead--an attempt at normalcy that gave Chaz enough impetus to shake off incipient brain-death and point to the pot in the corner. "Sorry, just finished the last mug. I've just been using the water from the cooler."

"Urmph," Brady said, and tossed his bag on the table. "Reyes and Todd not back yet?"

The sounds of coffee scraped from a Folger's can and dumped into paper were normal, too, as was the slightly stale, acrid scent of supermarket grounds. *If you pretend something long enough, it turns true*, Chaz told himself, pushing back from the edge of the conference table. "Did they tell you they'd be?"

"I called Reyes from the airport." Water burbled into the pot in Brady's hand as he half-crouched to get it under the cooler spigot. "He said they were on their way back, and bringing a real breakfast."

Chaz glanced at the litter of Einstein Bros Bagels bags and plastic knives in the trash can by the door. "You suppose he means tostada and café con leche? Or something a little more substantial?"

"Probably not café con leche," Brady said. "It being Reyes."

"Yeah, and how weird is it that the Cuban guy doesn't like coffee?" Chaz shook his head. "I think it's just to be contrary."

As if his words--or the smell of cheap coffee--had been an invocation, Todd materialized in the doorway clutching the handles of a grease-spotted paper shopping bag. He swung it around to show off the Winn-Dixie logo. "Considerably more substantial," he said. "You might want to move your laptop."

Reyes appeared behind him as he entered, while Chaz was hastily clearing the table. The conference room filled with the smell of onions, cumin, garlic, and grease.

"Oh, God," Chaz whimpered. "If I'd known about this, I wouldn't have eaten so many bagels."

"I have faith in you." Reyes set his own shopping bag on the table and pulled out paper plates, then an assortment of crumpled tinfoil bundles. De Los Santos was nowhere in evidence, and Chaz wondered if he'd gone home to catch an hour or two of rest.

Meanwhile, Reyes lined up packages. "Empanadas, congri, maduros. Some other stuff. It's last night's leftovers, so it's not exactly breakfast food. But since *we're* all last night's leftovers at this point, it seemed appropriate."

Todd was also doling out packages: obviously much-washed supermarket deli containers full of rice and black beans, a plastic bowl of some mashed root vegetable. Chaz's mouth watered at the aroma of fried onions while Brady wandered over, nonchalantly inspecting the outlay. And even more nonchalantly putting himself between Chaz and Reyes.

"Happy Valentine's day," Todd said.

Chaz was amused to note that Brady and Reyes both demonstrated exactly the same guilty expression and reflexive reach for the cell phone, before collectively remembering that it was The Dead Zone and nobody was going to appreciate a romantic phone call this early. He smiled behind his hand: he'd sent an email a little after midnight, casual and cheerful, fretting the whole time that maybe it wasn't an appropriate acknowledgement of whatever the hell it was he and Marti had going.

"God, that smell would raise the dead," Brady said, scooping up a paper plate. Fork in hand, he paused and looked at Chaz. Holding eye contact, he said--in the tones with which you might encourage a shy, hungry animal--"Betas first."

Chaz grabbed the nearest container of food so he'd have an excuse to look at his hands rather than noticing Brady's hesitant overture.

"This doesn't look like takeout," Chaz said, prying the lid off a deli container that--by the wrinkled and faded paper sticker on the side--still claimed it held German egg salad. "Did you hold up somebody's grandmother?"

"After a manner of speaking," Reyes answered, folding back the tinfoil sealing a paper plate full of starchy fried plantain chips. The next plate was sliced cucumbers and tomatoes dripping garlic-scented marinade.

"Yes," said Todd. "*Reyes's* grandmother."

"She's my great-aunt," Reyes said, rolling his eyes. "Two thirds of my family still lives in this town. I'd never hear the end of it from my mother if it got out that I visited Miami and didn't let Tía-abuela Xuxa feed me. I wish I could have brought Chaz to her, though, just to see what happens to her face when he gets up for fifths."

"I still find it a little creepy that you *have* family," Brady said. "I figured they grew you in the basement of the Hoover building."

Chaz, ladling beans and rice onto a plate, managed a sideways smile. If it was a day for peace offerings, he could manage one of his own. "Well, that explains why you were so eager to come to Miami."

Reyes hooked a rolling chair over with his foot and lowered himself gingerly into it. Fork upraised, he paused. "When you have tasted the rice, Boy Wonder, you will understand. Have you learned anything from the victimology?"

The tension in the room--Todd and Brady's unspoken and silent attention--focused on his response. Chaz had the power here, he realized, analyzing the alien sensation. They were waiting to see if he would accept Reyes' attempt to normalize relations. Before he put the first bite in his mouth, he said, "Nothing new and significant. But I'm still waiting on Hafidha. Anything in the interview--oh, my God. This is good."

Reyes grinned as if he'd cooked it himself. "Abortion flyers. Adoption flyers. Both families."

"Bingo. The kids are definitely the trigger, then." The rice was savory with olive oil and bits of onion sautéed translucent. Chaz bent over his plate,

eating between sentences, trying not to swallow so fast the rice gave him hiccups. "Remind me to send Tía-abuela Xuxa a thank-you card."

Chaz's phone and laptop chimed their email alerts simultaneously as he was starting on his second helping of empanadas. With a sigh, he pushed the plate aside, wiped his fingers, and pulled the phone from his pocket.

"Hafs," he said. "She's got a potential. Ingrid Fromberg and Peter Hsiung have twin seven-month-olds and recently filed a police report about harassing mail. Hafs sent the address."

Brady and Todd each shoveled in another forkful before pushing their plates away, but Reyes stood up unhesitatingly, reaching for his phone.

"Back on your heads," Todd said, turning for the door. "I'll get the vests from the car."

"Never mind," Reyes said. "The car is where we're going."

*

In the parking lot, Todd was still struggling with the velcro on his ballistic vest when Reyes tossed Chaz the car keys. Todd saw Chaz catch them automatically, a hand extending on a go-go-Gadget arm to hook them out of the air. They jangled hard, and Chaz wasted a moment staring at them. The look he leveled at Reyes after was not so much a speaking glance as a five-book opus.

"Aww, crap," Brady said. "And me without an airsickness bag."

Reyes opened the rear driver's side door. "Could you get us there faster?"

"Get in the car, Brady," Todd said, and slid in back, beside the boss. He buckled his seatbelt, folded his hands in his lap, bowed his head, and--as Chaz hit the flashers and laid rubber in the cop shop parking lot--commended his soul unto the hands of a just and loving God.

Maybe Reyes' presence in the car had a quelling effect, or maybe it just wasn't as bad at night, in the back seat. Or perhaps Chaz took some pity on his passengers, because Todd didn't think he was actually getting used to Chaz's driving.

Reyes, in a stunning display of coordination and grace under fire, retrieved his palm from his inside pocket while Chaz made the turn into traffic. He

flicked it on. "Do you need directions?"

"I looked at a city map on the plane," Chaz said, calm and competent-sounding. "I'll get us there. De Los Santos?"

"On his way," Reyes said. "I told him to wait for us on the ground, and not to send in uniforms. If we're lucky we're way in advance of trouble, and we'll just be waking up some nice people who are probably exhausted from midnight feedings anyway."

And if we're not lucky, a gamma would eat the uniforms for lunch.

The slide on Brady's pistol echoed as he chambered a round. "Then where's the cavalry?"

Todd looked at Reyes. Reyes was head-down and focused, and seemed not even to notice that Brady had spoken. Situational deafness. Hell of an advantage.

Todd thumped the back of Brady's chair. "Dunno how to break this to you, man. But you are they."

*

Chaz killed the flashers as they turned down a street dominated by the high-rise Fromberg and Hsiung lived in. He let the car glide to a vacant space on the curb half a block away and pulled in, laying both hands on the steering wheel for a second before killing the engine and the headlights.

"Go," Reyes said, door already swinging wide to fill the car with the smell of waterfront. Sharp sea, pungent rot, an overlay of diesel. The slap of four pairs of shoes echoed as they moved down the street, Brady and Chaz dropping to the back of the group as always. De Los Santos waited in the lobby with the doorman.

"He says no one has come in for hours," De Los Santos said. "He also says Fromberg and Hsiung aren't answering their intercom."

"We're going up," Reyes said, tapping the I.D. on his chest. "Unless you have an objection?"

Chaz wondered if the doorman was legal, from the way he shook his head, big-eyed, and stepped back out of Reyes' line of sight. Reyes glanced over

his shoulder, collecting De Los Santos into the team on a single sweeping gaze. When he headed for the elevators, the rest stepped with him as one.

"You've got to know," Reyes said to De Los Santos, "that if we're about to walk into a hostage situation, the perp may be much tougher than you anticipate. Be aware. Be *wary*."

"I saw *The Matrix*," De Los Santos said. "Like that?"

"Ideally? No."

Brady pushed the button for the top floor. "Even if Todd does look a little like Hugo Weaving."

They rode up in silence, harness creaking, the car reeking of gun oil. It was funny, Chaz thought, how even knowing nobody was listening couldn't stop you from praying silently to yourself. Or not-so-silently; in his peripheral vision, he could see the movement of both Brady's lips and De Los Santos's. Beyond them, he glimpsed the mirrored walls of the elevator, his own drawn face endlessly reflected. He fixed his gaze on Reyes's thinning hair, instead, and tried not to look at the raw pink lines threading through it.

Fromberg and Hsiung were on the twenty-first floor, their balcony facing the street rather than the ocean. As the agents left the elevator, Chaz fought the urge to turn and make sure the reflections weren't following him down the hall like a cascading CGI effect. *The fact that your post-traumatic stress is triggering does not mean the mirrors are really watching you, Villette.*

Reyes was hyperventilating right along with him. *First time back in the field.* Chaz drew his weapon and a deep breath of air and took his place on the right side of the door. There was nobody overhead, which meant muzzle-up was a safe position. He felt Brady panting behind him as he pressed his shoulder to the wall, and the calm, competent presence of De Los Santos. From the other side of the door, Todd's eyes met his over a rueful and encouraging grin. All Chaz could do was nod once and try to regulate his breathing.

Reyes, leaning in from behind the frame, pounded hard upon the panel. "Ms. Fromberg? Mr. Hsiung? We are federal officers. Please open the door."

Silence. Chaz caught himself holding his breath and forced his lungs to let that one out and take in another. By the time he was on the third cycle,

footsteps approached behind the door. Moments later, a shadow darkened the peephole. The voice that followed was male, muffled, well-spoken and crisp with nervousness. "Present your identification, please?"

Reyes opened his folder and raised it to the peep while Chaz took another breath in, let another breath out. *Maybe they're okay in there.*

Maybe they're alive.

The door cracked open and rattled on the chain. As it opened, Chaz heard a baby begin to cry. "Oh, god," said the man who peered through the gap, "Do you have a warrant? Is this a raid? We haven't done anything."

He was in his early fifties, fine-boned, Asian, with thick graying hair and pinstriped pale blue pajama bottoms. He matched Hafidha's forwarded driver's license photo of Peter Hsiung. The first baby's wail was joined by a second one.

Chaz took a breath he didn't have to force on himself, and with a look from Reyes holstered his gun. It still took a second to uncurl his fingers, and when he looked up again the old Reyes magic was in play and Hsiung was shutting the door to undo the chain and admit them. That was good. Once they were inside he could find a wall to lean against while he shook.

The inside of the condo was spacious and--once Hsiung moved around it, bringing up the track lights--bright. Spanish tile floored the kitchen and dining area that opened off to the left of the door, and was embraced by a big L-shaped living space in which Shaker reproductions focused on the inevitable wall-height sliding doors and iron-railed cement balcony beyond. On the right was a hall that must lead to the bedrooms; from that direction, Chaz could heard a woman cooing over the wails of frustrated infants.

"I'm sorry we woke them," Reyes said, as De Los Santos shut and locked the door behind them. "And I'm sorry to appear at your door at four in the morning with pistols drawn. We had some concerns you and your wife might be in danger. Is your wife in the other room?"

"She's with the girls," Hsiung said, eyes pinched tight and forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean, in danger?"

Reyes's voice was soothing, persuasive. Todd at his shoulder projected reassuring sympathy, and Brady was all the authority anybody would ever

need. He stepped back behind De Los Santos and crossed to lean against the bare wall beside the hallway.

Down the hall, Ms. Fromberg sang to her daughters. That was much easier to listen to than whatever half-truths Reyes was telling her husband to instill him with a spirit of cooperation. She was singing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." It might not be working on the babies, but it made Chaz want to shut his eyes and lean his head back. Just for a while.

He didn't, because if he did, he knew it would be all over. But her voice was sweet, if off-key.

And God, he was so tired.

*

Brady kept his gaze on Reyes and Hsiung, but that didn't keep him from using his peripheral vision to watch Todd watch Chaz play out his withdrawal. Brady thought he knew what Chaz was thinking, what he was feeling: Chaz was just *Fourth FBI Agent* in this scene. He knew the lines by heart, but he didn't have the strength tonight to play it.

Brady told himself that the frown with which he observed Chaz's adrenaline reaction was professionally stern, and that he didn't feel a pang at the way the kid folded his arms across his chest to hide it and hug it close. But when Reyes and De Los Santos drew Hsiung aside, getting him to turn his shoulder to the room for the air of intimacy, Brady leaned over to Todd and said, "I can tell you know something's still not right."

Todd's mouth twisted. "I'm aware of my own subtext, thanks." Then, in the unmistakable diction of a man Changing The Subject, he straightened up and intoned, "Oh-look-here's-Ingrid-Fromberg."

Brady glanced over in time to see her emerge from the hallway, juggling squirming babies. As if to give her name the lie, she was brunette. Brady guessed she was Chinese on one side. She was taller than her husband but about the same age, dressed in gray cotton pants and a tank top, and--to judge by the shadows under her eyes--worn out from lack of sleep. She gave a little squeak and jumped eight inches straight up in the air when she almost walked into Chaz in his gunbelt and body armor, who by his stillness had all but vanished against the shadows.

She stumbled when she came down. Brady sprinted halfway across the room before he knew he was moving, visions of dropped babies and broken ankles dancing in his head.

But Chaz was there. He caught her around the mid-back, his other hand steadying a slipping infant, and with a quick awkward sidestep managed to keep both adults on their feet and both infants from crashing to the floor. He turned as they stumbled into the hall and let his shoulder thump solidly against the wall, absorbing the impact for all of them.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry--"

Brady checked at the top of the hall, more afraid of knocking them off their feet than of them continuing to fall over on their own. Chaz had flattened himself against the wall, both arms full of Ms. Fromberg and her daughters, and was looking down at them through a mask of bemused chagrin.

"Oh, jeez," Fromberg said, tilting her head up to stare at the point of his chin, while one of the girls again began to wail. "Usually it's the girls peeing themselves around here. But I nearly just did. Are you okay, officer?"

"Special Agent," Chaz said, flushing from his shirt-collar to the bridge of his nose, with special attention to the ears. "Villette. Um. Charles Villette. Sorry. I'm *so sorry.*"

Hsiung must have pulled away from Reyes and De Los Santos, because he brushed unceremoniously past Brady and put a hand on Fromberg's shoulder. "Ingrid, you okay?"

"Sure," she said, stepping away from Chaz. "The dashing FBI agent kept me from harm. Here, do something with your offspring." She balanced the quieter bundle on her hip, leaning her body to offer Hsiung the screaming one.

"I'm sorry," Reyes said. "I know your daughter is upset. But I really need your attention."

Fromberg looked from the girl to Reyes, to Hsiung. "Did he say we were in *danger*? Oh, gosh. This kid. I'm so sorry--"

Brady almost tripped over *his* own feet when Chaz said, "I'll take her. She just needs a change. I can do it--if you don't mind me handling your child--while you talk to my boss."

He held out both hands, serenely competent, and both Hsiung and Fromberg stared at him. Probably not any more gape-mouthed than Brady.

"She does," Fromberg said. "But how did you know?"

Chaz touched his nose and grinned.

Fromberg, eyebrows rising, let him lift the little girl out of her arms. "You have kids?"

"Foster-siblings," Chaz said, emphasizing the plural. "This is not my first dirty diaper."

If he was telling the truth, Brady thought it wasn't the whole truth. "I'll keep an eye on him," he assured Fromberg, and followed Chaz and the unhappy little girl--who had stopped crying in shock at being handed off to a stranger, but was now watching her unlikely caretaker with big eyes and a crumpled mouth that said she might start up again at any provocation--down the hall.

"Do you always take a girl dancing before you get her name?"

"Lily," Chaz said. "Unless the other one is Lily, and this one is Rose." He neatly unfolded blankets, tossed them over the crib rail, and set the girl on a wicker changing table. Keeping one hand on her belly, he pulled a disposable diaper out of the box with the other and slid it under her behind. "She's teething, too, which is part of why she's more miserable than her sister, but I'm sure being wet and messy and woken up in the middle of the night by yelling giants doesn't help--it's okay, sweetie. Shh. *Shh*. We'll get you dry and find the Oragel and then I'll take you back to Mommy--and then there's being scared and confused and not being able to make anybody understand why."

Brady folded his arms over his chest while Chaz peeled open diaper tapes. The smell assured him that Chaz had been correct as to the nature of the contents. Eyes watering, he turned toward the fresher air in the hall.

"How do you know all that?" he asked, for something to say, because the other option was to start razzing Chaz about playing Mary Poppins, and Brady wasn't sure the fragile scar tissue of their working relationship would stand up to that just yet.

He wondered if he--or Chaz--was more surprised when Chaz, without looking up, answered quietly: "Because I remember."

*

"We'll want to place you in protective custody," Reyes said, in his best *I'm from the government and I'm here to help you* voice. "Just for a couple of nights, until we can find the people responsible. We will put you up in a hotel, and you'll have security."

He had positioned himself in the Hsiung-Fromberg's kitchen, leaned against the butcher block island so the couple could sit comfortably at their table and make eye contact with himself and De Los Santos. Todd was in the living room on his cell, making arrangements. Chaz and Brady were still in the nursery, but the second girl's howls of outrage had softened, so they must be making some progress.

Kitchens were a good place to talk. You brought your friends into the kitchen. It was a core room of the house--public space, but not for display, the way a decorated living room might be. Working space. The sort of place where everybody could have a cup of coffee and feel that much more comfortable.

"Do we need a bodyguard?" Hsiung glanced at Fromberg. He held his daughter on his lap; she was wide-awake and flirting with Reyes now, and occasionally banging her hands on the edge of the cherrywood table.

"I think it would be safest for your daughters if you accepted Agent Reyes's offer of protection," De Los Santos said. Like Reyes, he had taken the proffered coffee. Unlike Reyes, he was drinking his. "The unknown individual we're seeking may be responsible for at least eleven deaths, and we know he targets families with twin daughters."

"God--" Hsiung's daughter made a noise of frustrated protest as his arms tightened reflexively around her. His face blank with worry, he turned to Fromberg, but whatever he'd been about to say was interrupted by the triumphant return of Villette and Brady, bearing the second twin.

"I think she'd like a snack," Chaz said, placing her in her mother's arms. "But she took it like a trooper. I did her gums, too, though she wasn't overjoyed about it."

"She hates the taste," Fromberg said. "Or maybe the numb lips."

Reyes felt a sudden profound sympathy with the infant girl. The handoff accomplished, Chaz backed away. "Who doesn't?"

Hsiung leaned his shoulder against his wife. Obviously grateful for the interruption, he looked up at Chaz and said, "How did the microchipping go?"

Chaz stared at him, befuddled, and snuck a glance at Reyes. Fromberg just swatted her husband. "Ignore him. He has a terrible sense of humor."

Brady had fallen into position inside the archway. He shrugged.

Todd said, "No offense. Anyway, the NSA handles RFID-chipping citizens. We at the FBI stick to covering up presidential assassination plots. How are we doing in here?"

"Agent Reyes was just about to offer us a selection of fine hotels," Hsiung said, with a glance at Reyes, who nodded. He liked this couple and their broad--and obviously self-aware--use of humor as a coping mechanism, and every time he thought that, he felt his heart stutter a little at the thought of what might have happened if they had not arrived in time. The sharp pain of every deep breath was a reminder to regulate his breathing.

There was no reason to believe that the gamma would have struck here tonight, of course. But tell that to Reyes's endocrine system. From the way De Los Santos had his mug wrapped in both hands, he was feeling it too--all that adrenaline, and nothing to do with it.

"I have a few more questions to ask you first," Reyes said. "Unfortunately, they're somewhat personal. But your answers may help us track the killer, so I need you to be as honest as possible."

They were watching Reyes now, wary as cornered foxes. He read the relief on their expressions when his first question was, "Because we believe the killer is targeting couples with twins, I have to ask if you underwent fertility treatments when you were trying to conceive."

"Actually," Fromberg said, with a sidelong grin at her husband, "they were an accident. We had decided we didn't have the kind of life that would accommodate children. And then..."

"Excuse me," Chaz said, and cut across the center of the conversation as if somebody were winching him in, eyes fixed on a stainless steel refrigerator

covered with magnets and flyers and takeout menus. He reached out and pulled something down, a lemon-yellow trifold brochure, and extended it to Reyes.

Reyes took it from his hand. "Butterfly and Bee Fine Organic Produce," he said. He frowned at Chaz. "Is that the same company?"

"As the box in the Calvin scene photos?" Chaz nodded. "It is."

"It's a free trial," Hsiung said. "Local organic produce. A couple of nice young ladies were handing out flyers. We get a box a week for a month, and if we like it, we can sign up."

"So far?" Reyes asked.

"Actually," Fromberg said with a shrug, "It's not all that great. We've got one more box coming in the trial, and I was going to cancel."

"Ms. Fromberg," De Los Santos said, "I don't suppose you still have the last box?"

"No," she answered. "We recycled it. But I've got some eggplants and a couple of zucchini."

*

Reyes had Chaz call Hafidha, who confirmed in a few seconds that there was no such business as Butterfly and Bee Organic Produce. A Miami PD crime scene tech arrived ten minutes later, along with a pair of uniforms and a yawning female detective named Houska who must have owed De Los Santos a favor. The CSI accepted the vegetable evidence with a tolerant grin, signed for chain of custody, and vanished again like a zephyr. She'd obviously fingerprinted weirder things than aubergines. Fromberg, Hsiung, and their daughters left for the hotel a few moments later, in the care of Houska and the two uniformed officers.

Reyes turned back to his liaison and his team. "Alone at last," he said, just to watch Brady roll his eyes. "Okay. We need a plan of action. How do we locate the gamma?"

De Los Santos cocked his head at the unfamiliar term. "Gamma. Is that like UNSUB?"

"Only anomalous," Todd said, provoking De Los Santos to grin at him. "If the gamma is watching this condo, he knows we're on to him."

Chaz, his eyes on the bare patch of refrigerator door that had been under the brochure, said one word. In Reyes's opinion, possibly the worst word available.

"Gammas."

Brady's sharp intake of breath was as good as the question none of them could quite frame. Chaz looked up. "Or a gamma and an accomplice. But I can't imagine an alpha accomplice *surviving* a gamma long. A team, anyway. Isn't it obvious?"

"Twins," Reyes said. *A gamma and an accomplice. This was getting to be a theme.*

"Twin girls. Two nice young women handing out flyers. Adoption agencies. Older, affluent parents. We know" --Chaz rubbed sweating hands on his corduroys, larynx bobbing as he swallowed, but his voice stayed authoritative, his recitation becoming a chant-- "We know there's a genetic component."

"We *suspect*," Reyes corrected, but Chaz rolled over him and kept going.

"The UNSUBS are women, young. Sisters. They were orphaned or abandoned at a young age, and were either raised in institutions or the Foster Home Of The Month Club. And they *resent* it. They want revenge. They'll demonstrate all or part of the homicidal triad. They have a criminal history, but it may consist of primarily misdemeanors. Some of it will revolve around starting fires. They may have been physically or sexually abused; they were certainly neglected. Their fingerprints will be in the system."

Chaz stopped, abruptly, as if rising out of a trance. De Los Santos was staring at him; Chaz noticed and looked down, pinning his gaze on the toes of tasseled tan loafers Reyes could have used as lifeboats. "Sorry," he said.

"Don't be," De Los Santos said. "That was pretty fucking awesome, man. You sure about that?"

Chaz nodded.

"You don't get a lot of female serial killers, do you? No, wait--" De Los Santos held up both hands. "That's one of the things you mean when you say 'anomalous.' Right?"

Again, Chaz nodded.

Todd looked up. "What if they're not biologically related? If they were step-sisters, if they thought of themselves as sisters--they could still share parental trauma. Assuming they are both gammas, which is the most paranoid way to proceed, and therefore the one I feel most comfortable with."

"The genetic component--" The tension line of Brady's throat told Reyes how hard he was working not to turn and stare at Chaz.

"One instance is not proof of causation. It's not even really all that suggestive, except for being a remarkable illustrator of the power of the human mind to construct patterns out of coincidence." Todd said it very gently, looking directly at Brady so that Brady had no choice except to look right back.

Chaz would never know. His eyes were closed, spine arched, belly sucked in so taut Reyes could see the outline of his ribcage through the shirt. He blew air out, hard, hissing through his nose: diaphragmatic breathing.

Brave kid, Reyes thought, and did the only thing he could do--change the subject wholesale. "We need those fingerprints."

"I'll get it expedited," De Los Santos said, reaching for his phone.

Act IV

"Too easy," Brady said in the car, five hours later, while Todd sweated into his ballistic vest. "You really think they're in there? It can't be this damn easy."

The object of his attention was an overgrown doublewide trailer set among rows of similar structures. A sagging lattice porch festooned with winter-drab trumpet vine was anything but welcoming, and no movement showed through grimy windows.

IAFIS said the fingerprints on the squash that weren't Fromberg's belonged to Tameka Santiago and Carey-Ann Petit, and the Florida DMV said that Santiago and Petit lived here. Todd had stared at their license photos so long the images swam in front of his eyes like sunspots: two thin, pretty girls in their early twenties, one a dark-skinned, classically African-American beauty with crooked teeth and a pierced nostril; the other's fine, pale features framed by fine, dark wisps of hair.

The trailer's side yard had a garden patch and a few more trellises, overhung with yellowed vines and woody winter squash. Unless that was an intentional misdirect, this was the place.

"I think you just cursed us," Todd said, pulling open the passenger door.

Reyes and Chaz emerged from the next vehicle, standing to greet De Los Santos as he crossed the road from a gathering of SWAT team members. "We've cleared the surrounding residences," De Los Santos said. "We're ready to go."

"Right," Reyes said. "Let's do this."

Todd never had much luck remembering exactly what went on during a raid. Running and shouting and the crackle of his earpiece, straining for any sign of movement or sound of a threat. Sweat, his arms burning from the weight of the gun, the acrid stink of his own adrenaline filling his sinuses and coating the back of his tongue. The tight-chest anticipation of *any moment mayhem.*

And then nothing, as voices familiar and new rang back from every corner of the trailer. *Clear! Clear! Clear!*

Reyes, calmly, from the kitchen: "I got something."

Something turned out to be a stack of hand-folded yellow brochures and two-foot-cube boxes, only one of them assembled. Crack and peel labels were stuck to two sides of it, reading *Butterfly and Bee*. A glance in the open top confirmed newspaper and sad-looking vegetables inside. The cigarette-scarred card table underneath overflowed with fast food wrappers and overwhelmed ashtrays.

Todd rocked back on his heels and shared a frown with Reyes. Before he could speak, his headset crackled.

"Bedroom," Brady said. "Somebody's been packing. We're too late." He came stomping out of the rear of the trailer a moment later, Chaz lurching along at his heels. "Todd might be right about them watching the condo."

"Todd's always right when he tells you something that will not improve your day," Reyes said. "Okay, we know they're on the run. We know they don't have much stuff--"

"They must have split last night," Chaz said. "It looks like a thorough packing job, and they didn't take the car that's registered to Petit. It's still parked out back. So they had something else to work with. Maybe they stole something."

"Maybe they went on foot," Todd said.

Reyes jerked his arms in frustration, moving like a pissed-off spider yanking the strands of its web. "Shit," he said. "Options?"

Brady said, "They were watching the Hsiungs and saw us go in. They've got nothing to hold them in Miami except familiarity. They're in the wind."

Chaz shook his head. "They've identified a target. Those kind of victims don't grow on trees."

"Yeah." Brady's jaw worked. "My profiler brain says we catch them now, or we lose them in the long grass for god knows how long and god knows how many more deaths before we pick them up again."

Reyes squinted at him. "Your what?"

"Profiler brain," Brady said. When Reyes stared at him, he spread his hands in exasperation. "Like your lizard brain. It tells you things you don't want to know, and *it never shuts up not once."*

Reyes looked at Chaz. "You think they're not going to give up on Hsiung and Fromberg."

"I think they're not going to give up on Lily and Rose. They resent those kids, Reyes. It's *personal*." Chaz's hands clawed in emphasis. "They hate 'em like you hate the guy who ran over your dog. And they're--"

Gammas.

"Right," Reyes said. "Chinese fire drill. We're going back to the Hsiungs'."

*

When Brady slid behind the steering wheel, he found Todd already in the car, forehead leaned against the passenger window, staring into the hazy mid-day distance without seeing a thing.

"Hey," Brady said. "You in there?"

"They're pretty girls," Todd said. He didn't lift his head. "Twenty-year-old girls. They should be worrying about calc tests and getting their hearts broken. Goddamn *clusterfuck*."

Brady pushed the key into the ignition. It didn't turn; after a bad moment he realized he'd left the wheel jammed over. When he leaned on it, the car started.

Todd spoke as if the silence oppressed him. "379 days to retirement."

"Oh, right. Happy birthday." As they pulled out, apparently it had become Todd's turn not to answer. And Brady's turn to fill the silence.

He said, "Why do we always get these again?"

Duke shrugged. "Who ya gonna call?"

Timing was everything. Brady gave it two beats before he filled in, "The good news is, unlike the Ghostbusters, we have somebody who actually *knows* how to drive a meatwagon."

At first he thought he'd blown it, but when he glanced over, he saw Duke shaking in silent laughter. He wiped his cheek ostentatiously as Brady hit the lights and said, "That's what I love about you, Danny. You can always see the upside."

"To any kind of clusterfuck at all."

Todd unfolded his arms and sat back in the seat. "God, I hate stakeouts."

*

Miami, FL, February 15, 2009

Sunday night, Chaz stood at the front of the living room, arms wrapped across his chest, the watch Hafidha had given him closed inside his left fist. A dim spill of light from the hallway was enough to scrape reflections across the inside of the sliding glass doors, blinding him to the balcony and the

night outside. City lights stretched far below, bright enough to shine through the glass, but not bright enough to balance light levels and let him see anything else.

Somewhere out there were two girls just a little younger than him, chipped and cracked by a life not too different from his own, knapped into a shape he found all too recognizable. Angry and abandoned and lost, and striking back in the only way that made sense to them.

It didn't make what they were doing right, or sane. But *somebody*, somewhere, should have been able to intervene and save them. There was no lie Chaz could tell to make himself believe that deep down, he was any different.

He had the autopsy report to prove it. He'd murdered his monster, too. And yet he was waiting here to stop them if he could, to kill them if he couldn't. Because he knew they were watching, and he knew they would come for Lily and Rose. Even if it meant their own deaths.

That was the thing. They were smart. And they *were* watching. And *they* needed to believe they were coming for Lily and Rose. He knew what would tempt him from hiding in their place. And he also knew how he would have been biding time for his chance.

Chaz felt Todd about to come into the room before he saw movement reflected in dark glass. It didn't always work, or even most of the time. But one of the untrustworthy tricks of the mirror was that sometimes, when it was quiet and still, Chaz could sense it sensing what to reflect when someone's attention fell on him.

"Brady and De Los Santos checked in from the surveillance van. Nothing stirring. And the pizza came."

"Hm," Chaz said.

"Hungry?" Todd asked, which was shorthand for *I need to know if you're functional, and I respect you too much to ask if you're keeping it together.*

"I should eat," Chaz said, which wasn't an answer.

If Daphne were here, she'd be leaving cartons of takeout on the kitchen table and shoving chopsticks into his hands. Todd didn't answer, just came a step closer. His silence made a space between them that invited Chaz to fill it,

and Chaz, even knowing what Todd was doing and how he was doing it, still felt the pressure. And the relief, when he opened his mouth and said, "I keep thinking about jumping."

Not suicide. And not falling, the way the victims had fallen.

Jumping, the rush, the air howling in your ears like choirs of enraged angels cursing Lucifer down. Committing yourself of your own free will to free fall. Making the choice. Taking all the precautions and then taking the chance.

Todd made an encouraging reporter noise.

"One death might not be cleaner than another. But fire hurts. People know that, because they've been burned a little and can extrapolate."

Was that a flinch crossing Todd's face? It was, an empathic grimace.

Chaz let the subject slide inobviously to a related topic. He'd been going there anyway. "But the experience of free fall is a lot less common. Not many people know what waiting for impact is like. Until you're there and it's too late to go back."

"You used to skydive," Todd said, neutral and offhand. "You think it's like that? When they chose to jump, to get away from the fires in their heads?"

"I had a canopy," Chaz said, flatly. *They didn't*. His left hand tightened on the pocketwatch so he could feel it tick against his palm. He remembered the plunge, the exhilaration, the snap of the canopy opening. An old-fashioned round parachute was just a drag device, but a modern canopy was an airfoil. When it opened, you were *flying*.

"You know, it wasn't exactly skydiving."

"Yeah," Todd said. "We know."

He grinned at Chaz in the window, scrambling the horizontal lines that normally defined his face. Chaz blew hair out of his eyes, closed them tight and shook his head. Well, he hadn't gone out of his way to keep them from figuring it out.

Todd said, "Why'd you stop?"

Tick. Tick.

"I was too good at it." Chaz should turn around, have this conversation face to face. He swallowed and made it happen. Nobody will ever be able to say you didn't have guts, Villette. All sorts of other things. But not that you didn't have guts.

"That's a funny reason to stop." Now they were eye-to-eye, Todd's head tilted back as he looked up at Chaz. A small, slender, unassuming man, gray-eyed and dark-haired, what hair he had left. Insignificant.

Sure.

Chaz let his hands drop to his side so he could slip the watch into his pocket. The tick was like a heartbeat, but he didn't want Todd to know he needed the comfort. "So we're really careful, you know? Meticulous. Everything triple-checked, hundreds of jumps to learn the skills, it's not... slapdash. But you're still playing chicken with the dirt. People get competitive. See how far they can push it. How long they can fall, how low they can pull. You don't get a lot of time to fix mistakes if you make them, and everybody makes them."

"And because of your stage one, you could push it farther than was safe for anybody else."

Chaz nodded. Tick, tick. Tick.

Because he was Duke, Duke didn't say any of the stupid, obvious things. What happened? Who died? It's not your fault, you know--Todd just heard the silence, understood what was coded in it, and folded his own arms, tacit permission for Chaz to mirror and do the same, resuming the comfort of his armor.

Stage one.

"Her name was Ramona Marjorie Parks," Chaz said.

"Was she your girl?"

Chaz shook his head--*your girl*, only Todd would say that, like somebody's grandfather--and Todd sucked in a breath through his teeth and said, "Sometimes that's worse, you know?"

Things that didn't happen were always more complicated than things that did. His whole life was a testament to that one.

Chaz said, "I wasn't her type. But I was... in awe of her. She was my best friend. She was total commitment. And she taught me some stuff. Lots of stuff. Like okay, hotshot, your timing is awesome, your reflexes are insane. But equipment fails. The environment intervenes. You can open on an off heading. You can have a line over your canopy, or you can have an object strike, or you can tangle in your lines. The pilot chute can collapse instead of deploying your main canopy. *Stuff goes wrong*."

"The plan never survives contact with the enemy," Todd said.

"Yeah." Chaz forced himself to drop his hands to his sides, and this time Todd mirrored him. The game everybody played, but because of who they were and what they knew, they were playing it with intent. Intention *mattered*. "And you think the ground is a long way down. And it's long enough to have plenty of time to think about it. But if something does go wrong, it's not like skydiving."

He tilted his head and rolled one shoulder up, as if trying to scratch his ear. "BASE jumpers don't use ripcords. It's static lines or just the pilot chute. And we don't carry reserve chutes. There's no time and there's no point."

He gestured to the night invisible beyond the reflections. Twenty-one stories down. A little over twelve feet to the story, in this particular building. Plenty high for an exit, if you knew where to land and if nothing went wrong. A little over four seconds of free fall.

As Todd had pointed out back in DC, a second was an awfully long time. Chaz waited four seconds before he continued, just to test it out. It felt like a lifetime.

"I liked jumping," Chaz said. "This sounds crazy, but it made me feel in control."

"Doesn't sound crazy at all." Todd came across the living room finally, leaned his palms against the glass door and his weight on his palms, spreading asymmetrical hands wide. Not hiding the missing fingers for a change. "You know. When I was in 'Nam..." He stopped, snorted. Shook his head. "It wasn't 'Nam."

"Yeah." Chaz turned to stand beside Todd, facing their images in the glass. Hiding his faint, painful smile. If he looked at the shadows they cast, *then* he could see through their reflections to the city below and beyond. "We know."

"There's ways to tell people things without ever actually telling them. Subtext. Misdirection. Indirection. White space in the narrative."

Tick. Still ticking.

"Yeah," Chaz said again, because it deserved an answer. "We're not going to catch these women this way, Duke. They're not coming after Lily and Rose as long as they know we're here. We can't stay here forever; they've got more time than we do. And nobody else can protect the twins."

"Yeah," Todd said. "I know."

Shoulder to shoulder, they waited. Chaz heard Todd breathing, slow and steady, unruffled and unhurried, as if all he had to do in life was take in air and let it out again. It was different to make the choice, rather than have it be forced upon you. It was one thing to give something, and another to have it stolen.

Agency. Agency was the thing that kept you whole, when the monsters tried to take everything you were and make you eat it.

Falling and jumping were not the same. "Duke?"

"Yah?"

"Get Dad," Chaz said. "I have something to show you two."

*

When Todd came to collect Reyes from the kitchen, the stillness of his features was all the warning Reyes needed.

"Chaz wants you," Todd said.

Reyes set his murder mystery aside and rose from the chair he'd been perched on, reflexively touching his sidearm. "Did he say why?"

Todd let his shoulders rise tightly and fall. A self-contained man, watchful and prone to keeping his opinions to himself. A secret-keeper, which Reyes could respect.

So many of them in the unit were. Had to be. When you were full of dangerous knowledge, you learned tactics for protecting people from it.

Todd said, "It took fifteen minutes for him to work up to it. I wouldn't give him too much time to think."

Another secret kept, the conspiracy of silence and support the team had built around Chaz since he was injured. A wall that could easily become a trap, for keepers as well as kept.

"Coming." Reyes made sure Todd saw him adjust his weapon. Todd's breath caught in his throat, and his brows rose. Reyes wanted to close his eyes. Instead, he nodded.

Todd's spine straightened and his chin tucked. With a small movement of his hand Todd brushed the hem of his jacket behind the holster. Reyes didn't need to discuss the potential for all the ways this could go bad. He and Todd had forged their understanding in the days before there was a Shadow Unit, when it was just that sometimes there was a particular type of bad one, and everybody in the BSU knew Reyes and Todd were the guys who made a hobby out of those.

So Reyes just asked, "Is this a worst-case scenario?"

Todd's voice wasn't a whisper, but it was almost too soft to hear. "I'm not sure. But I don't think so."

Reyes let go of the breath he'd only just realized he was holding. "Then don't do anything you can't take back until you *are* sure."

"Steve," Todd said, in a voice that commanded attention. There was a lot of charisma in that intense frown, when Todd decided to stop making himself seem like somebody's addled bachelor uncle.

Reyes stopped, frowned back, and said, "You only use my first name when it's life or death."

"It's okay to care about the kid."

Whatever Reyes had been anticipating, that wasn't it. "Excuse me?"

"I said. It's okay to let yourself care about Chaz."

"I care about everybody on this team--"

"This," said Todd, "is where I point out that you can't bullshit a bullshitter. He's the son you never had, and you desperately want him to be okay, and you're terrified if you let yourself feel any warmth for him you'll miss the first subtle sign that he's turned and then we'll all pay the price. And that is a hell of a burden to put on any relationship, personal or professional."

Reyed caught himself staring, slack-jawed if not gape-mouthed, and blinked. If he *were* trying to learn to parent, there weren't many worse ways to do it than trying to parent a feral, emotionally bereft twenty-six-year-old. He said, "Is that what's going on?"

"Also," Todd pointed out, "I feel like I should point out that just because we know Chaz and Hafidha have got it, whatever it is, doesn't mean that any of the rest of us couldn't flip over to the dark side if the right buttons got pushed. The anomaly does not respect purity of heart, Sir Knight. Now tell me you haven't thought of that possibility. Go on. I double dog dare you."

It would have been a lie, and he and Todd both knew it. "Hell," Reyes said, at last, when he had realized that whatever Todd's dissection had set tossing in his gut, he wasn't sorting it out today, and slapped a lid back over it. "I fucking hate profilers."

"What?" said Todd. "You forgot the rest of us can do it too?"

Act V

Reyes and Todd walked into the living room side-by-side, Reyes thought, like the disposable field agents from a movie: two fit, besuited men in their fifties, one black and one white. Chaz had been standing with his forehead leaned against the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass, but he turned at they entered, the pressed-pale triangle on his sallow forehead reddening as blood flowed into it. His gaze flicked from Reyes to Todd and then back again.

Reyes told himself it was the pressure of that stare that drew him up short across the width of the cavernous living room, some twenty-five feet. Perilously short range. And of course, Chaz had a gun of his own.

Reyes said, "You wanted me?"

"The UNSUBs are not coming after Hsiung as long as they know we're here," Chaz said. "We know they can wait. We know they will spend as long as it takes cultivating a target. They like to be seen but unnoticed, even as it feeds their fury to be unnoticed by the parents they think they should have had. They'll hold back and wait until we're gone."

Reyes nodded. "You have a suggestion?"

"I have a solution," Chaz corrected. Grinning like a skull, he vanished before their eyes.

The weapon was in Reyes' hand before he'd registered drawing it. He felt something move through the room, a stir of air, but couldn't track it. When he turned he found Todd armed and turning too. Their eyes met, then Todd's chin jerked towards the kitchen. Through the archway, Reyes heard the rattle of cardboard and the sound of chewing. A shadow fell through the light that streaked the floor.

Reyes said, "Did you know about that?"

"I guessed. Something. Not what."

Todd licked his lips like a nervous dog. Reyes thought of saying, If it goes bad, we have to remember that's not Chaz in there anymore.

But of course that was the most terrible secret of all. It was Chaz, and it always would be, even if he were a gamma now. It wasn't like a movie zombie, the killing made easy by the knowledge that the person you had cared for was just a shell with a monster inside. The monster Reyes knew held the person you loved hostage as well.

"Cover me," Reyes said. "I'm going in to talk to him."

"Steve," Todd said. And then he stopped, when Reyes turned to him, and shook his head. Because anything Todd could say, Reyes already knew. "Remember he cares about you, too."

Yes. Which, if it was a gamma in charge in there, made Reyes all the more tempting a target. Hurt him, hurt the host. The anomaly loved a good return on its effort.

"I'll keep it in mind," Reyes said.

He holstered his gun before he went through the door.

*

While Reyes and Todd stood blinking at where he had been standing, Chaz dug his fingernails into his palms and walked between them. Most of a pizza still burdened the kitchen table, cooling towards room temperature, the crust soggy and the cheese congealing. Chaz could have gotten a plate, a glass, paper napkins, and served himself and sat down at the table like a civilized

creature. Instead, he dropped the mirror, folded it and slipped it away. Then he reached out left handed and hooked the box, flipped the lid up, tugged loose a slice of pie. He folded it in half lengthwise and leaned over the box to eat, supporting the floppy middle with the tips of his right fingers. Big bites, barely chewed. Barely tasted. If he thought too much about eating, the conditioned response from the AZT would kick in and he'd be swallowing bile.

He was still keyed up from jamming, the mirror raw and ticklish. It tried to kick on again when Reyes came through the archway behind him, a shiver of silver across its surface as if somebody had pitched a stone. Chaz sat on it, hard, and pulled free another pizza slab.

"That's a second-stage manifestation," Reyes said.

Chaz, mouth full, nodded. He'd bitten off too much; he chewed ferociously and swallowed, a lump that stretched his throat and hurt going down. He turned around.

Reyes stood just inside the doorway, hands at his side. Left thumb resting on his belt, fingers in easy reach of his piece. There was no indulgence in Reyes' expression. Just the kind of intent concentration you would turn on a big, agitated, potentially dangerous dog.

"Since when?" Reyes asked, as Chaz had known he would. Because that didn't just happen. Obviously. Chaz had done that thing, and known how to do it, and shown it to Todd and Reyes so they would know he could do it and see the obvious way in which it was the solution to their problem.

Chaz couldn't pretend he didn't know what Reyes was talking about, but he could buy time while chewing. When he got his mouth cleared, he said, "Since Texas."

"That's how you got him."

There was nothing left in Chaz's hand but the crust. He folded it into his mouth without glancing down, chewed, and swallowed. Not nearly enough, but it would hold him until after the argument. And there was definitely going to be an argument.

"That was the thing I couldn't figure out from the scene," Reyes continued. "How you got him. Why did you feel the need to hide it?"

Chaz closed his eyes. "I was ashamed."

Like an abused child. Like a rape survivor. Like anybody who has had their autonomy and self-determination stripped away.

"Because he made it happen," Reyes said.

He said it the way Chaz never in a million years could have. Matter-of-factly. With no extra emphasis on the word *he*. With all the fucking compassion in the world.

Chaz nodded. "It's like a gun. You don't pull it until you're prepared to shoot someone."

"You still should have told us."

So you could have poked and prodded and questioned me about that too? But Reyes was *right*, which was what sent the conversational antibodies sailing through Chaz, ready to come snarling out of his mouth. Chaz counted ten instead. He bit his lip and thought about temperate words, about the reassuring things he should say. All of them lies, the kind of mollification and placating that had been frozen out of him in six nights curled on a cold slab floor.

"Like all the things you told me?" he said, and was pleased at how calm-sounding his voice came out.

"Need to know." Reyes stepped forward into the kitchen, shaking his head, but he still didn't tuck his hands in his pockets. "I didn't think it would be helpful to you. I was probably wrong."

"And it was helpful to set Brady up to kill me?" Adrenaline pumped through Chaz's system. The cold tingle of his fingertips said *be ready to fight*. The deep determined flex of his heart answered *be ready to run*. The mirror shivered in response, rattled mylar, and Chaz felt it slip as if through his fingers and begin to unfold. It was all right there, laid atop Reyes' response as easy and uncomfortable as an unsent letter, and Chaz grabbed it and twisted it around and fired it back in anger. Reyes' voice, and the way Reyes wore his face, and the relaxed hands shoved into his pockets, the one dropped shoulder that belied all the fucking pain he had to be in, casual and nonthreatening.

Everything Reyes was not, right now.

The mirror said, "*Subject is a thirteen-year-old mixed-race male with wildly inconsistent test scores. He has survived significant trauma--the drug addiction and death of his mother would, in my opinion, provide more than sufficient footholds for the progression of the anomaly as we understand it--and while there's no evidence yet of sadistic proclivities, we know that the anomaly is capable of masking its existence and activities for long periods of time. Extreme caution is recommended in the care of this adolescent. While this subject is potentially one of our best leads in understanding the early progress of an anomalous individual, if that in fact is what he represents, there are other concerns--*"

"Villette," Reyes said, his expression blank as the face on a coin.

Chaz shut the mirror's mouth, hard, with an effort that hit him like a punch. He dragged his hands from his pockets, leaning heavily on a Windsor-backed chair, and swallowed nauseated saliva.

"You've known I was a monster for thirteen years," he said. "You left me there--you gambled my life and the lives of all my school mates and foster families--to see what kind of monster I would grow up to be. Why are you so surprised to find out you were right?"

"There wasn't--" Reyes started. And then he stopped, checked himself, brushed aside whatever he'd been about to say with one hand and said the truth instead. "At the time, I couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't know you weren't safe. I could--what. I could have had you placed in Idlewood. *That was my option, Villette*. Would you have been better off--safer--if I'd decided from your test scores that you *were* a monster?"

"The people around me might have been." Chaz turned aside because he had to, but he kept Reyes in his peripheral vision. He needed this and he was manipulating Reyes so he could hear it. And he didn't care.

"Do you know what else was in that report?" Reyes asked. He quoted--from memory. "*It is my recommendation that this adolescent be kept under observation until such time as further determinations of his potential--both academic and for violence--have been made*. I agonized over that sentence. Could I have done better? Probably. *Definitely*. But damned if I know how, even now. You think the Clark County foster care system would have taken kindly to a Fed--a black, Latin, *Eastern* Fed--swooping in and telling them

that an at-risk child who was being housed and fed and educated and provided with adequate medical care was in need of more than that?"

"No," Chaz said, and because this was one of the more honest conversations of his life, he didn't hesitate before he said it. "But you placed other people at risk when you left them in contact with me. When I could have been--anything."

"Your file indicated that it was unlikely that you would harm anyone."

"The file of a juvenile gamma?"

"You're *not* a gamma--"

"Don't lie to me." He spat it out like loosened teeth, and let it lie there on the red Spanish tile between them. "Don't make an ass of yourself by lying to me, Special Agent. I'm a mirror. I know what I am."

Tick. Tick. Still ticking. Chaz couldn't feel the watch unless his hand was on it, but he could imagine. It was at least fifteen seconds before Reyes drew a breath, let it out again, and pushed his hands into his pockets, ruining the beautiful line of his suit.

"No," Reyes said. "You don't. Whatever that mirror reflects, all it tells you about yourself is the absolute darkest truths. Tell me something, Villette. Have you ever intentionally hurt *anything*?"

"I stuck a butcher knife into my father's spine and twisted it until he bled to death," Chaz volunteered, in what felt like a quite reasonable tone of voice until the words were out of his mouth and he saw Reyes' reaction.

"Self-defense," Reyes said, mildly, his eyebrows wrinkling his forehead. "Try again?"

"You," Chaz said. "Just now."

Reyes shrugged. "Same exception. Are you done?"

Chaz wondered if Reyes could see the pulse jumping in his temple. He took a breath, held it long enough to feel dizzy, and said, "Tolerably. For now."

"Do you need to be relieved of duty?"

"I need to catch the people who killed Mary Wursthoff and her daughters."

"Can you?"

"Yes." Or die trying. Which Reyes might consider a check in the plus column, right about now.

"All right," Reyes said. "Chaz. Listen to me. I'm only going to say this one more time."

Chaz knew already what he was going to say. And it didn't matter, because he found that he deeply--cravenly--wanted to hear it. *Pathetic*, he taunted himself--and then what brought him up short was not his own voice in his head, but Daphne's. *Needing people is not the same thing as being a failure*. He nodded, because he didn't trust his voice, and pinned his eyes on Reyes' shoes.

"You are not a monster. You are--Chaz, look at me."

Somehow, he got his eyes up. And despite what Reyes had done to him--had failed to do for him--he kept them there.

"You are the exact opposite of a monster. If anything, you sacrifice and efface yourself far more than is good for you. You don't *always* have to let the competition win to be a good person. Sometimes, you're entitled to want something. Sometimes you're entitled to fight for what you want."

Chaz flinched. He needed to look away again, but now that he had Reyes' gaze, he couldn't. *How much does he know?*

He's Stephen Reyes. He knows as much as he chooses to.

Chaz nodded, though it hurt.

Reyes said, "Okay. Then we'll talk about this further when we get home."

"If we get home," Chaz said, even knowing that he shouldn't, that he should take the offered cease-fire and back away.

Reyes was already turning toward the doorway. He paused, glanced toward the living room, then turned only his head to look back at Chaz. "Don't even say it."

*

The noise, when it happened, was human noise: two grown men arguing in stiff, stilted voices about the sort of betrayals you never could quite fold up and put away. Todd let himself breathe when he heard that, though he kept them shallow, listening.

And when Reyes came back through the door, shoulders crunched around his ears, Todd was still there and still holding his gun.

"He converted," Reyes said, without preamble.

"In Texas. I heard."

"Did you catch the manifestation?"

"Besides vanishing like a conjurer? I heard his Evil Overlord version of you, if that's what you mean--"

"He's got two," Reyes explained. He took Todd's elbow, and led him away from the kitchen, from which now issued the rustle of paper, the monotonous, mechanical crunch of Chaz eating pizza. "Two manifestations. Functional invisibility. And--what the hell do you call the other thing?"

Todd decided that if Reyes had his hand on Todd's gun arm, it was okay to put the gun away. While he was feeling for his holster, he said, "Provisionally, it sounds like Throwing Every Stupid Thing You Ever Did Or Even Thought About Even If It Wasn't Witnessed By Anybody Back In Your Face."

It didn't get a laugh. But it got Reyes to toss his head back ruefully, which was something. This much intensity wasn't good for anybody's judgment.

"He said he was a mirror," Reyes said. "That's the mythology. Chaz and his masks, being whatever you expect him to be, barely there at all behind them. If you could have seen it--he looked like me. Not the me in photographs, the one you almost don't recognize. The real me."

"The one you sometimes don't like very much."

"Yeah," Reyes said. "That's the guy." He shook his head. "He knew just what would hurt, too."

Todd pressed his lips together and managed not to say, *from the sound of it I'm not sure you didn't deserve it*. Instead, he said something more important, and harder to get out. "I know what you said to him, but--was that a gamma thing to do?"

The eyes Reyes turned on him were dark enough to seem black, shining with moisture. Todd knew the pinch at their corners was the closest Stephen Reyes could come to demonstrating grief.

"No," Reyes said. And he looked down. "Because what he threw at me in there?"

Todd nodded, and watched the flinch shudder across Reyes' features.

"Wasn't the worst thing I've ever done to him. So he's not a gamma." *Because a gamma wouldn't hold anything back*. "Call Brady. Tell him to go get the family and bring them here."

"You're *not* using a couple of babies as bait. Reyes."

"Hell, no," Reyes said. "Haven't you ever heard of a decoy?"

Todd pressed his knuckles into his eye sockets. "Three hundred and seventy-fucking-eight days to retirement."

*

Livejournal post, somewhere in the Internet

Chaz (standuponit) wrote, @ 2009-02-15 11:01:33

[filtered/Wabbit and Harpy] I know I have a lot of explaining to do.

I am so, so, so sorry, and I hope you will forgive me someday.

Current mood: ashamed

Current music: Quiet out there. Too quiet.

[Add to memories] [Tell a friend] [Track This] [Link]

*

Chaz had expected that Brady's arrival--with De Los Santos, Hsiung, Fromberg, and the bundles of old clothes that were standing in for Lily and Rose--would be the overture to an explosion. Instead, Brady paused inside the door, looked Chaz up and down, hunched his shoulders around his ears like a disgruntled bulldog, and proceeded past.

It was better than he deserved, Chaz supposed. He'd just try to stay out of the way while Brady was in the condo. The conversation with Daphne and Hafidha when he got home would be worse. *This is what comes of not breaking the bad news quickly and getting it over with.*

In any case, Brady wasn't going to stay long. Just long enough for Hsiung and Fromberg to dress in navy blue windbreakers, wraparound shades, and

ball caps that read *FBI* across the brows. There was no way to disguise Chaz and Brady as anything but themselves, and it wasn't necessary; they would accompany De Los Santos and the civilians to the transport waiting outside, where all five of them would appear to leave. In reality, Hsiung and Fromberg would be returned to their daughters, Brady and De Los Santos would drive around the block and park their van to the condo's garage to take up a ready position... and Chaz, wrapped in mirrors, would take the service elevator back up to the twenty-first floor and rejoin Reyes and Todd, who would be lying in wait.

This last part of the plan was the one Brady objected to most strenuously, though not--to Chaz's surprise--because of Chaz. "Three of you against two gammas," he said. "Even with the elevator override key, I'll be between ninety and a hundred fifty seconds away."

Long enough for anything to happen, his expression said.

"I can last three minutes against two women with no combat training," Todd said, his voice as calm and reassuring as ever. "Even gammas."

Their gazes crossed, Todd's and Brady's, and for a second it was just them in the room. *Soldiers*, Chaz thought, but like Robert Frost and his elves, it wasn't soldiers exactly. It was one of those things Todd had mentioned, the things you know without being told.

Brady shrugged; Todd looked around the room. "And I won't be alone."

"If you get my team killed while I'm not here to cover them, I will personally come to Hell, track you down, and kick your skinny ass, Solomon Todd."

Whether or not Brady was looking at Todd when he said it, Chaz knew his words were for all three of them. He caught himself nodding agreement and turned away to hide a grimace that kept trying to turn into a smile.

*

Miami, FL, February 16, 2009

Solomon Todd sat in the warmth of a darkened bedroom and listened to Reyes breathe in his sleep. He could sleep too, if he wanted; Brady and De Los Santos were ensconced in the van, and somewhere out there in the living room was Chaz. Well, Todd assumed it was the living room. How did you go about keeping track of your invisible friend?

He *could* sleep if he wanted. But sleeping in Kevlar gave him a rash, or so he'd told Reyes when Reyes lay down fully clothed atop the covers. Bemusedly, he wondered if it was true.

So he was awake when his earpiece crackled sometime around four AM, and Brady said, "Somebody just pulled in. Green sedan."

It was the seventh such news bulletin since midnight. Todd saw the glisten of the whites of Reyes' eyes as he lifted his head, awakened by his own headset.

Todd lifted his wrist to his mouth and said, "Copy. Is it them?"

They weren't sure this was how the gammas were getting into the condos. The garage was just a guess, supplemented by Hafidha's assertion that someone had accessed the card lock in each building immediately prior to and following each of the other incidents.

Todd coughed. He massaged his throat, trying to drive out the itch before it made him cough again.

"I'm waiting for a clear line--no. One occupant. Male."

On the bed, Reyes sat up suddenly, and coughed also, doubling over, racked with spasms.

"Never mind. It's on," Todd said, before another bout seized him. "They're here."

The bedroom door stood ajar, and through it he glimpsed flickering, an erratic orange light that made his gut twist and his eyes water. He felt the heat as he dropped to the floor, belly-crawling, the MP-5 pushed out before him. His elbows chafed on the insides of his sleeves.

It's not real.

Reyes crouched beside him, purpled by the glare of uncontrollable fires. "It's not *real*," Reyes said, ducking his head low beside Todd's. Tears streamed down his face; the smoke thickened between them. Reyes was lost in it.

Todd pushed himself to his knees, found Reyes's elbow by following the sound of coughing that came with little grunts of pain. Tapped it to let Reyes know where he was and found him standing. Stood himself, into the heat, the

blindness, the searing pressure of flames licking now across the ceiling, the black streaks they left behind. He got his weapon up.

Coughing. He couldn't stop coughing. *It's. Not. Real.*

The illusion of blindness was as effective as the thing itself.

He crouched, a compromise, and now saw Reyes crouching also, by the door, back flat beside it, one leg kicked out for balance and his machine pistol at high ready. Firelight limned one side of his profile, gleamed off snot and tears.

"Three," Reyes said, and Todd did the count in his head.

They came down the hall like SWAT, clutching their MP-5s. Striding through the flames, Todd was sure he felt the shoe leather crisping around his feet. The fire slammed across the hallway in front of them, level with the nursery door, just a few feet ahead of Reyes. Blocking the path they should have been being herded along.

The gammas knew what they had in the trap was not what they had come to catch.

Fine.

The heat leaned on Todd's face like a hand, shoving against him. Pushing him back. Somewhere beyond it, beyond the flames, beyond the death and the burning in his hands as if his gun were also on fire, he heard a woman screaming.

Reyes shied back, squinting through a furnace light, smoke, glare and black shadows. The living room lay beyond, a few short steps. On the other side of a wall of heat that curled Todd's eyelashes, sizzled his flesh under his vest. He smelled char, ozone, the reek of his own burning hair.

Fire hurts. People know that, because they've been burned a little.

"Or a lot," Todd said, and stepped forward past Reyes, into the veil.

The fire might not be real, but the pain was. And the line of flames did not part before him; rather, more fire sprang up to greet him as he passed. He pressed on, walking on stumps, cinders, ashes. Somehow his burned feet carried him. Somehow his burned eyes saw.

Somehow his burned hands held the gun out before him, though the gun burned too, in an impossibly blue flame, until he couldn't hold on to it anymore and it fell away into the firestorm.

Where the hell was Brady? Where the hell was Chaz?

The flames curled away, rolling up like a carpet before him. A gap, which he stepped into, because he must. Reyes at his heels, both of them knowing it was a trap.

As the flames snapped shut around them, it was no comfort at all to learn they were not wrong.

*

The headset brought Chaz all sorts of sounds, all sorts of information. Brady's heavy breaths and the echoes of his footsteps; Todd's voice chanting three words between hacking coughs. Reyes, silent except his struggle to control the rasp of his wheezing. The sounds told him there was fire. The sounds told him his team was fighting.

He couldn't see the fire at all.

He saw two girls--*young women*, the well-trained part of his brain corrected--two pretty girls by the door, just inside it, the taller and darker--Santiago--closing it behind her with a hand protected in a nitrile glove. The smaller and fairer--Petit--turned to survey the condo, her eyes skipping over Chaz as if he were just one more shadow in the unlit living room. She held her sister's right hand, their fingers interlaced, and in her other, gloved, hand she had a ring and two keys. The fake delivery business got them in the door, Chaz understood, and who didn't leave keys lying around? Easy enough to copy.

They stepped into the apartment, peering about like a pair of feral cats. Two or three more steps, still clutching each other, brought them into the middle of the room.

Chaz raised his pistol and let the mirror fall.

"Federal officer," he said calmly over the sights. "Carey-Ann, Tameka, please put your hands where I can see them and step away from each other. You are under arrest."

Carey-Ann spun, dragging Tameka with her. She threw the keys--hard--at Chaz's face. Good arm; they would have smacked him over the eye if he

hadn't leaned aside. He felt the keys snag on his hair as they passed, and ignored it to bring his sight picture back in line.

"Bastard," she said. "Who the hell are you? *Who the hell are you!?* "

"I'm a federal officer," Chaz repeated. "You are under arrest."

She screamed, white frustration, bleak and searing as the flames that erupted all around her and her foster-sister like curling petals. She stood amid them like Lakshmi rising from a crimson lotus, and for a moment Chaz was struck by the horrible beauty of the illusion.

But then the flames raced outward, dragon-tongues. Chaz locked his arms, push-pull, steadying the muzzle of the Sig as fire broke over him. *The fire's not real. It cannot hurt you*.

Crawling flame blanketed the entire condominium. A wall of orange-blue veiled the hallway, fire caterpillar-creeping up walls and around the kitchen arch. *There* was the heat. The unreal heat.

Tameka yanked Carey-Ann's arm, dragging at her, and managed to shift the smaller woman two steps towards the doorway. But Todd and Reyes burst out of the flames behind them, Reyes armed and Todd empty-handed, and now their route back was blocked as well.

"Tameka," Chaz said. "Please put your hands up. Please. *Please*. We don't want to hurt you."

He would have said more, but the fire silenced him, his lungs searing with every breath until he was sure he could feel the alveoli bursting like blowtorched grapes. He coughed, shuddered. Through curling illusory smoke, Chaz saw Reyes raise his machine pistol. He braced for the shots--wishing he had time to tell Reyes no--but no sound came.

Reyes held his fire. The flames were harmless, the pain just the pain of a ghost. All it could do was frighten.

Forty-five seconds. In approximately one minute, Brady and De Los Santos and two more guns were going to come through that door.

Brady *might* hold back. Nobody could expect De Los Santos to do anything but kill.

Squinting over the barrel of his gun, Chaz let the mirror shake itself wide.

Don't. (It said.) *Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me Mommy Alice don't burn me I'll be good I'll be good I'll never smoke again I'll never touch your curling iron I never please don't I never--it wasn't Tameka it was me, me, me, me please don't hurt her it was me....*

He got hold of it, clawed it close, hooked the edge in so he could breathe past the reflection. Saw Carey-Ann's wide eyes over the top of it, saw her recoil. Stagger back, until Tameka's hand on her wrist was the only thing holding her upright.

He watched the flames die away to every side. Reyes and Todd were over there somewhere, but they were beyond the edge of his adrenaline tunnel vision. There was nothing here: nothing but him, two gammas, and a dying, illusory inferno.

For half a second, he dared to hope.

Tameka dropped her sister's hand and lunged.

Reyes might have gotten off a burst. Chaz wasn't sure. He squeezed the trigger and hit and would have kept squeezing, but fifteen feet was too close and the gamma was on him, clawing, choking, thumbs gouging up under his chin. The gun went skittering, *that way*, and then he was soaking in slick blood, trying to bring up his hands to strike the insides of her elbows. The pressure stopped his breath, filled his mouth with saliva that ran down over his chin. He hit her, hard, got a knee in her diaphragm. The blow drove a mist of blood out of her mouth, across her face, chased by the breath he'd pummeled from her. Seconds. One, maybe two.

She snapped at his face with flashing teeth. World swimming black, he bashed her nose in with his forehead, got his hands inside her arms finally and jerked sharply out. Nothing, God, gamma-strong and the air wasn't getting in him, the strength draining like blood.

There was a rescue knife in his pocket, the same place it always lived. Blade on one end, razored hook on the other. For cutting yourself free of tangled things. He grabbed after it, jammed his hand into the folds of fabric. Rough plastic bent his fingernails.

She snapped away. He heard something terrible pop, twist, and for a moment wasn't sure it wasn't him. He rolled up on one elbow, shied from her bulging eyes, already swimming with pinprick hematomas, her lolling tongue. She

dangled from the lamp-cord in Todd's hands, swaying bonelessly as an empty skin, a wet stain spreading down the thighs of her jeans.

Todd gave her one more shake, like a terrier shaking a rat, then winced and--with an uncoiling twist of both hands--let her fall.

"*Shit*," Chaz said, and rolled to his feet as the wall of fire he'd known was coming roared over and through them. Carey-Ann. She was right there, no--there, somewhere. Behind the smoke and heat which couldn't hurt him, but could blind him, blind them all. Until she found his gun, Todd's gun, a poker from beside the fireplace. Anything at all.

He couldn't see her, but he could feel her. Feel the wall of her hate, her pain, her thwarted love. Feel her hiding behind her fire of the mind as she scrabbled past him, toward the balcony, toward the shape of Chaz's pistol.

A huge sound, but not the sound of gunfire. The sound of a door kicked open. *Brady*.

Chaz let the mirror spread, as it wanted to spread, and filled it full of fire. The fire that burned him, burned Todd, burned Reyes. Burned Brady and De Los Santos as they charged into the room. The fire that had burned Carey-Ann, that she remembered with every nerve ending and fiber of her body. The fire that shivered like a pyre in Solomon Todd's nightmares. The fire that had stalked Chaz through those long nights in Texas, like a tiger at the edge of the dark. All the fire in the room. All the fire in the world.

Carey-Ann lifted his gun. It didn't matter if she knew how to use it. It was live, a round chambered. All she had to do was press the trigger.

Chaz swept up fire like light through a lens and let it burn.

Her fire. Her demon.

He aimed it back at Carey-Ann.

She turned, spun away from him, fired. Fired the gun and kept firing, moving through a curtain of shattered glass, out onto the balcony until her cut hands gripped the railing and she jumped up, leaned out, balanced--

--and like a leaf, let go.

*

Chaz sat outside the broken window on the cement balcony, fingers folded between his knees, letting the cold wind ruffle his hair. Predawn grayed the sky and brought out the shadows between the tendons on the backs of his hands. He didn't look up when he sensed Todd approaching.

Todd stopped a few feet back, leaning over to peer down the side of the building to where city lights still burned, below.

"Long way down," he observed. "You're going to have to account for that Sig."

"Poetic justice." Chaz's head felt heavy. He dropped it into his hands, pulling his hair into tufts. "I'm okay."

"Sure you are." Whether the dropoff really bothered him or not, Todd came to stand at Chaz's shoulder. Chaz braced himself for the platitude, the offer of a sympathetic ear, the "We're-here-for-you-Charlies." But instead Todd breathed in, breathed out, and said, "You don't have to talk."

"Reyes is wrong," Chaz said, when he had intended to take Todd at his word. But a bubble of something--self-loathing, honesty--pushed the words up out of his throat. "I should be in Arkham."

Chaz felt Todd shrug. "Idlewood is for the monsters. Reyes doesn't think that's you."

He knew Todd saw his left hand curl into a fist, saw it strain the roots of his blood-sticky hair. He raised his head, tugging against the pain, and looked Todd in the eyes. "Sol. When I had the knife in my hand, I didn't stop." He gestured to the broken window. The flash of red and blue emergency vehicle lights reflecting off neighboring buildings locked his attention. Down there, cops and CSIs and an ME were bustling about. Yellow tape was being stretched. Firefighters were considering the best way to hose the brains off the sidewalk. Chaz didn't need to see it; he could construct a perfectly satisfactory simulation in his head. "I didn't stop this either."

Silence, while Chaz waited for Todd to say, *You saved my life tonight*, or something else true but inadequate. Instead, Todd said, "I'm going to touch you."

Chaz didn't look at him, but nodded. And Todd reached out and began to untangle Chaz's fingers from his own hair. Inch by inch, Chaz forced them to

unlock, and made himself not resist when Todd pulled his hands away and placed them back on his knees. The touch itched, made him flinch, especially when Todd--as if automatically--brushed the pad of his thumb across the nearly-invisible symbol tattooed on Chaz's wrist. He endured it, and Todd pretended he didn't notice the way Chaz shuddered.

"She chose the fall over the fire."

Todd said, "It's the same choice she gave her victims."

"And what choice did she ever have? Carey-Ann? Her and Tameka?"

Todd shifted from one foot to the other. "You wish you felt worse about killing her than you do."

It was more shocking to hear somebody say it out loud, matter-of-factly, than just to feel it. Not feel it. Whatever. Chaz swallowed, his throat not as raw as he thought it should be. He asked, "How do you know that?"

"*It* wins when *you* hurt, too," Todd said, stepping back. "You don't deserve that."

Just pretend you accept it. Nod, and let it wash over you. Don't argue. Sure.

"You positive about that?"

"Yeah."

When Chaz didn't answer, Todd scuffed at the floor. "We learned something else today."

Unwillingly, Chaz felt himself nod. "Two gammas. One manifestation. No genetic link. But a wealth of common environments. How does that explain me?"

Todd paused. When he spoke, finally, it was in clinical tones that would have done Frost proud. "So maybe it's not hereditary. Maybe it's acquired. Maybe it's not genetic, but still congenital. Maybe you got it from your mother, something she was exposed to while you were *in utero*." He shrugged. When Chaz snuck a glance up at him, he was staring over Chaz's head, granting Chaz a peculiar kind of privacy. "Maybe it's a fucking teratogen. Did you ever think of that?"

Chaz hunched forward, legs drawn up, elbows pressed between his thighs. He pushed his face into his knees and breathed the smell of laundry detergent and stale sweat. Denial flared hot in his chest, but he choked it back.

"But more likely it's a complex of factors," Todd continued. "The evidence so far indicates that if--*if*--there's a genetic predisposition, it has to be triggered under the right circumstances, and they define how it manifests. Primary and secondary cracks, right?"

"Except Hafidha and I don't have primary cracks, now do we?"

Todd rolled his eyes. Chaz just caught it from the corner of his attention. "Who can tell? It's not like we can do family interviews for either of you. Maybe you both caught it young, younger even than Mitchell or Grossman. Maybe that's the saving grace."

"The Anomaly is *chicken pox*?"

"Or more like shingles. Do *you* remember everything that ever happened to you?"

"Maybe not the first six or seven months," Chaz admitted. "But I remember--"

No words, just an eyebrow.

"Everything after I converted," Chaz admitted. "Or when I must have converted. So maybe I had a childhood illness. Maybe it was freaking birth trauma. Maybe we're just like serial killers, is that what you're saying?"

"Genetics, environment, and trauma inform the pathology? Sure, why not? It's always more complicated. Pardon me, I'm just going to compromise this crime scene a little more, here." Avoiding the broken glass, Todd plumped down beside Chaz, knees drawn up, bony ankles exposed in argyle dress socks.

"Stylin'," Chaz said, and Todd extended a leg for inspection.

"Still too hip for the room."

The wind was good, left to right across the gap, steady and not strong. It wouldn't blow you back into the structure. It wouldn't gust from behind and create a low-pressure pocket. Good wind. But cold.

Cold enough to make Chaz's chest ache, and the muscles between his shoulders, and the bones in his hands. That healed break in his right wrist, too, like the blade of a butterknife prying between the bones. He lifted his head.

Chaz wanted to take even more of the blame, to tell Todd that if only he--Chaz--had had a little more foresight, he would have had his rig on and been able to go after: outfall her, track her, catch her. Pull low and save her life.

Sure. In the movies, where his canopy wasn't in a closet in Arlington. Where four seconds was long enough to catch somebody in free fall when they had a half-second head start. Where the firefighters wouldn't just be hosing two sets of brains off the pavement.

From a plane, he might have pulled it off. Not from a high-rise.

They watched the sunrise for a little while, other people's voices lofting from the crime scene below. Finally, Todd said, "Do you think I don't know I'm the team's executioner?"

Chaz felt the flinch like a spasm all the way down his back. Muscles contracting, making him jerk. "It's not fair of us to ask that of you."

"Life isn't fair. And there's a limit to the number of times you can be damned for the same offense." Todd stretched out over his knees, grabbing the tips of his shoes in both hands. "Did I ever tell you why I joined the Bureau?"

"Did it also have anything to do with when you weren't in Cambodia?"

Todd snorted, folding his maimed hand inside the whole one. "Vietnam. I wasn't in Vietnam. No, this was a lot later. Mid-eighties. I was freelancing, living in Brooklyn in an unreinforced masonry walkup that would give any self-respecting San Franciscan nightmares. Well, late one night early one morning I was tapping away on a story, and the intercom buzzed. Which wasn't unheard of--I was keeping ink-stained wretch hours in those days and everybody knew it--but when I got up and hit the button I heard screaming."

"Duke--"

"Hush. I'm telling you a story."

Chaz hushed. "Sorry."

Todd accepted the apology with a negligent gesture. "Lots of screaming. A man and a woman."

The silence stretched until Chaz had to fill it. "What did you do?"

"I called 911." Todd glanced sidelong and spread his hands. "And then I got my revolver out of the drawer and went downstairs to see what was happening."

Chaz waited. The pause was part of the pacing. But he nodded, to let Todd know he was listening.

"The lobby was on fire," Todd said. "And so was the young man who must have pushed the intercom button. His clothes were burning. He was burning. And screaming. And the woman who was with him was screaming, too, and beating at him with her hands. I thought she was trying to put the fire out. I stuffed the gun in my waistband and pulled off my shirt and went to help."

Chaz realized from the sting that he was biting his knuckle, and pulled his hand away from his mouth. "She wasn't trying to put the fire out."

"She was a gamma," Todd said. "The guy was her boyfriend, and it turned out she caught him cheating, and--"

"Right," Chaz said. "Spontaneous human combustion is one hell of a manifestation. How the hell does the energy conversion on *that* work?"

"She was in breakthrough." Todd rubbed his hands as if they hurt. "So here we are, right, and I'm trying to put out the fire on this poor motherfucker, and he's trying to get away from the girl, and about the time my slippers start smoldering I figure out that this is not what it appears to be."

"You shot her," Chaz said, when Todd had been silent longer than was usual.

"I tried."

He turned his right hand over and showed Chaz the palm, a pale stretched-looking burn scar crossing the top half. The ligature mark from the lamp cord crossed it, livid and swollen, seeping at the edges. Chaz's hand curled in sympathy.

"Good thing I threw the gun at her, because the rounds cooked off, and I hate to think what would have happened if it had still been shoved down my pants."

Todd hit the deadpan and the arched eyebrow just right, and Chaz couldn't help it. He started to laugh. Helplessly, leaning forward to lay his forehead on the backs of his hands, while Todd patted his shoulder with avuncular affection. When Chaz stopped, he turned his face and gasped, "So why didn't she set your slippers on fire?"

"She starved to death while she was trying."

It was cold at dawn in February, even in Miami. Chaz had plenty of time to notice how it raised the hair on his arms while Todd thought about what he was going to say next.

"But I *would* have shot her if I could have held onto the gun. The boyfriend lasted about two weeks before the burns got him: third degree over sixty percent of his body. I was only in the hospital for three days."

"Oh," Chaz said. He sucked on his lower lip for a minute. "And then what?"

"And then I figured if anybody knew anything about this, it would be Uncle Sam. So I passed the bar and joined the F.B.I. And eventually found Reyes."

Chaz turned so the cold wind blew across the back of his neck, prickling the hair there. "So you're saying you became an F.B.I. agent in pursuit of a lead?"

Sol did that thing with his hands, the one that involved a tilt of the head and each palm rotating in opposite gestures, as if to say, *It is what it is, kid*.

Chaz contemplated inappropriate comparisons with Popeye the Sailor Man. Instead, he said, "And the rest is history."

"God," said Todd, standing up again. He dusted his hands on his trouser legs. "I hope not. Are you following the moral of the story here?"

Chaz shook his head.

"Self-defense is not murder." Todd held his hand out, fingers extended, to lift Chaz to his feet if Chaz would take it. "Murder is murder. And even if you become a monster, it doesn't mean you have to stay one."

Chaz stared at his hand, but didn't reach for it. Not yet. There was more coming.

Todd huffed irritably. "And when I say *you* I mean *me*, all right?"

That was the end of the story. "All right."

"Are you ready for breakfast yet?"

Chaz consulted his appetite. He would have been ready for breakfast hours ago, if he weren't trying to punish himself. "You buying?"

"Sure," Todd said. "Let's go find an Awful House and do our paperwork. I can put off retirement for a couple more years."

The author would like to thank Tom Dancs, whose expertise on BASE jumping was invaluable in making Chaz sound legit. Any errors, of course, are my own.

Opportunity Cost

Baltimore, MD, January 2009

Chaz Villette has long been of the opinion that all climbing gyms are secretly interdimensional portals to the same place. To get there, you follow Google directions through old warehouses and factory complexes to locate a familiar, comforting alternate plane where towering walls and dangling ropes are overlaid with the smells of magnesium chalk and sweaty feet. Where inked, pierced folk in ratty clothing and beat-up climbing shoes dangle like bats from steeply overhung bouldering problems. Even in a strange city, if you are a climber and it has a gym, you can always be home in half an hour.

Goth clubs are pretty much the same thing: wormholes to Dimension Goff. The walls will be black or violet. The paint on the front door will be chipped and the interior will be dark and filthy, with inadequate uncomfortable metal lawn chair seating and a red velvet circular couch. There will be an (ironic) disco ball. There will be EBM, Industrial, Goth dance music loud enough to rattle the self-consciousness and sorrow from your bones. And there will be men and women peacocking on the dance floor in gaudy, elaborate clothes. Permissible color schemes: black and crimson, black and emerald, black and amethyst, black and silver, black and anything eye-hurtingly actinic. Or just plain *black*, which is usually Chaz's choice.

Nobody in a Goth club is looking at you. They're too busy watching themselves in an imaginary mirror.

Goths *dance*. Turned inward, submerged in the thump and shudder of one hundred twenty beats per minute, feet and elbows flying, they swing their corseted bodies and stomp their booted feet. They shout with delight when they like the music, and they shake their hair extensions like Medusa arising from the bath.

D.C. is unique in that its best dance club isn't Goth. But that's okay, because Baltimore has a Goth party Friday at Club Orpheus. And it's not too far to drive for five hours of dancing.

Because all Goth clubs are secretly the same, they acknowledge their kinship through a family assortment of names. *Haven, the Church, Flux, Sanctuary.* This particular iteration is an *Ascension*, and Chaz likes it fine. He knows how to dress to blend in, and for freedom of movement--black t-shirt with a Skinny Puppy logo (self-mockery is oh so very Goff), baggy black cargo pants, braces, a trio of graduated chrome chains swinging at his hip. Doc Martens help support his pistol in an ankle holster, velcroed tight in place. Eyeliner. Spiked leather covers the scars on his wrists. Soft suede on the inside doesn't trigger his panic disorder, and nobody's going to grab his arm.

Except for the gun, these choices place him firmly in the middle of the sartorial road. They'll make him functionally invisible, which is exactly what he wants.

He pays the cover, accepts the hand-stamp, steps into a wall of sound. The thumping is more something you feel in your chest than hear with your ears. He threads through the crowd to the dance floor and joins women busty or slender in jaybird-bright brocade and black velvet, black tulle; one girl in a thoroughly unfortunate red satin micro-skirt and fishnets; a woman wrapped in a cancan skirt like a giant crimson flower; a pale dark-haired girl all in rivers of white lace; two women necking while wearing kinbaku--rope harnesses--stretched over the legal minimum; a boy in a mesh shirt and dog collar with pendant leash (kind of tragic, with no one holding the other end); men in flowing skirts and maxi-kilts, one wearing a leather waist-cincher; a big guy in a double-breasted gangster suit and a porkpie hat.

Three gorgeously turned-out women by the speaker stacks are dancing a mocking Macarena to "Nemesis," bosoms heaving as they stroke gloved hands down corsets, wriggling like fishes. If you're going to Macarena in a Goth club, you have to commit. Chaz swallows, suddenly dry-mouthed, their laughter rising over Barry Andrews's chanting monotone: *everybody happy as the dead come home.*

Everywhere velvet, leather, lace, tulle, fishnet, mesh, pinstripes, fedoras, tophats, tailcoats, bridal gowns, women and men writhing on their little patches of floor, no eye contact required. Three shaved-head punks drinking by the bar roar along with the lyrics. A guy slumming in an Adidas shirt, soul patch, and blue jeans--if she still came out dancing, Hafidha would say

oh, Honey, one eyebrow rising, and thinking of her and Goth clubs reminds him of Erik with a terrible pang--is trying to catch the eye of the woman in white lace, but she turns like a top in the other direction.

Nobody has to notice anybody here if they don't want to. Nobody's paying any attention to Chaz: cadaverously thin six-foot-four men aren't even all that *unusual* here. He stands out more for his skin and features: Goths are white, mostly. But it's not enough to get him noticed, and he's glad.

Chaz lets the music fill him up, move his feet, swing his hips, lift his arms. He leaps, punches, stomps and whirls. *Goth tae-bo*, Hafs would mock, but thinking of her makes him miss her too much, fills him with guilt that he's here and she can't stand to do this anymore. Maybe it'll change. Maybe she'll heal. He believes in her, and she's strong. He punches the air again, spins, crosses feet, dances briefly with a skinny sweaty girl with blue hair and beautiful collarbones before she vanishes into the crowd, dances with a gorgeous drag queen in a little black dress and Marlene Dietrich hair, dances with a girl who crosses her arms behind her back and shows her throat in an offer he's just not prepared to accept.

The exercise is good for his shoulders: get the muscles warm, swing them around, explore the range of motion. But it's better for his soul.

Shriekback gives way to :Wumpscut: begets Siouxsie falls before Combichrist, and he's still dancing. Joy Division, the Talking Heads, Rasputina, Reaper, Nine Inch Nails, Das Ich. Bauhaus. Tool. Leonard Cohen. Coil. Angelspit. Massive Attack. Gary Numan. KMFDM. Thirty years of loud. It's good, and the clean sweat rolls down his body. Ninety minutes, two hours later--he's lost track--he pauses, chest heaving, on the edge of a Delerium track, and decides now is the time for a beer. Apparently he's not alone, as the crowd on the dance floor is thinning.

Slow songs--works every time. Send 'em to the bar.

He wades through the jostle and elbows, orders a Bass Ale and a shot of Jagermeister, and leans against a pillar, weight in his heels, arching his toes against the uppers of his boots for relief from a cramp. His wind's coming back: he's soaked in sweat, hair stuck in wet spirals to his scalp, but he's not breathing hard so much as moving air efficiently. He thinks of Falkner saying *your definition of normal might change*. He thinks of hours at the

gym, of running through parks first with Erik (there's that pang again, sharp as a dental pick popping his sternum) and now on his own.

He downs the shot--syrupy-sweet anise--and chases it with bitter beer, feeling his throat working, the blur of alcohol on an empty stomach. Feeling alive.

A couple of people linger on the floor, one a woman in leather corsetry and a netting skirt who is sheened with effort, her long chain earring clinging to the moist skin of her neck and cheek whenever she turns her head. She spins, sweat rolling down her throat as she lets her head fall back, hands clenching on tulle. Chaz turns away before he can imagine what they would feel like if they were knotting in his hair.

Crimson wings.

It's just a flash of color that jerks his head around as the girl in the (unfortunate) red satin micromini drops her drink with a crash you can't hear over the music and starts to sway. Chaz sets his empty beer on the bar and moves forward, ready to catch her elbow, but somebody else is already there, a nondescript brown-haired white guy of average height, unremarkably dressed in a black t-shirt, Docs, and jeans. She sags against him, head lolling, and alarm runs up Chaz's spine. Alcohol can hit fast, especially skinny girls, but not like that.

The guy guides her towards the club entrance, one arm around her shoulders, more dragging than walking her. Chaz allows the mirror to unfold. He permits himself to follow. Now people magically move aside, clearing a path without knowing they do so. He closes the gap fast, and as he comes up behind the guy he lets the mirror reflect.

The words that want to come spilling from his mouth are bad. He bites his lip against them, chokes them down, swallows hard though they stretch his throat and *hurt*. *Bitch whore tease slut show you show you show you all you fucking cunt.* He drops that fast, makes it blank and featureless, having learned all he needs to know.

He could intervene now, stop this, cause a scene, get the girl home. And the rapist--if that's all he is--would walk away to try again tomorrow.

Chaz's hands itch as if circulation returned after a cord cut the palms. For a moment, he considers whether this is one of the dreams, more elaborate and real than most. Or if his dreams have only been offering him a solution to such intractable problems. If they're dreams at all.

You could make sure he never hurts anyone again. You should *make sure he never hurts anyone again.*

The club is hot and humid inside, but the air on Pratt Street chills the sweat on his neck in seconds. Ten steps ahead, the guy still guides his half-insensible victim along the street, through crowds of late-arriving clubbers and the occasional reeling drunk. Just another Friday night in Baltimore. Chaz trails like a vengeful ghost, sidestepping revelers, so warm from exertion that the winter feels comfortable rather than sharp.

No one else is going to help her. No one else can stop him. Nobody but you, baby boy. Angel of mercy.

Yeah, Chaz thinks, hunger a cramp in his gut. *Yeah. Me and Dexter Morgan. Except Dexter should be a bedwetter, but they would never put that on T.V. So maybe me and the Goddamn Batman. Who else is going to come through for that girl?* Chaz can't let himself be seen. He can't reveal himself now. He couldn't handle the explanations.

The crowds thin. His quarry's footsteps echo, and the girl's drag. The suspect thinks he's the predator, and maybe he is, but he's got no idea there's a bigger predator following. *Jackals should fear tigers*, Chaz thinks. *And what should tigers fear? Something's gotta eat* T. rexes. *Even if it's only bigger* T. rexes.

The quarry guides his stumbling prey into the same garage Chaz parked in, and Chaz thinks, *Ideal*. Chaz follows cautiously, the mirror burning all around him, sugar-shakes starting in his fingers as the meter runs. *Hang in there just a little longer, cowboy. Be strong.* He unclips the chain from his belt loop, feels it run cold and smooth as water between his hands. This is good. This is right. This is what should happen.

He was brought here tonight for a reason. He's here to save a life. The bad guy just has to commit.

Still supporting the girl with his left hand, the guy reaches into his pocket and chirps a four-door sedan on the second level. He opens the rear door and pushes the girl inside. She folds up, slumps over, and for a moment Chaz considers climbing in too, letting the suspect drive away with more than he bargained for.

The suspect keys open the trunk. He rummages, comes up with a blue canvas bag and a roll of duct tape.

Rape kit.

Be the hand of God. Make sure this particular jackal never hunts again. The chain glides across his palm. He looks down, remembers the cut of cord across the dream of Joshua Lynch's throat, the creeping warmth of piss trickling down his thigh. Remembers a leather belt twisting tight and tighter. *Take care of it,* he thinks. *Keep your secrets. Protect her and you both. You can't get caught here.*

And then he thinks *Hey. Why not?*

He's *not* the Goddamn Batman. Within reasonable tolerances, *he's a cop.* A cop with every right to be here. One who hasn't done anything wrong.

There's nothing *illicit* about an FBI agent going clubbing.

Gamma, he says to the voice in his head, imagining it sulking into silence. He slips the chain into his pocket and the iPhone out.

The trunk lid slams. The suspect walks back to the open door, the harsh rip of unpeeling duct tape filling the echoing garage. Chaz crouches, and with an answering rip of velcro, lets his semiautomatic slide into his left hand. With the right one, he dials.

A brisk, pleasant female voice says, "911. What's the nature of your emergency?"

He identifies himself and his agency. "I'm on the second level of the parking garage at 815 East Pratt, and I'm witnessing an abduction in progress. The car is a white Saturn, Maryland license plate--" He speaks in a harsh whisper for fifteen more seconds, while the abductor tapes unresisting wrists, hiding his actions with his body and the car door. He straightens up and swings the girl's legs inside.

No sign of the police yet. The door thuds closed. Chaz is running out of time.

"I'm going to make the arrest," he tells the operator. "Please alert the responding officers that I'm in club clothes. I'm a Latino male" -- incomplete, but adequate for purposes of gross identification-- "late twenties, six-four, slender build, and I'm armed. I'd rather not get shot by a cop."

"Sir," the operator says, "officers are enroute. Can you stay on the line?" But he's already setting the phone--still connected--down on the concrete, folding the mirror, stepping out into the suspect's line of sight. Eyes watering with hunger, he raises his Sig.

"Freeze," Chaz says. "I'm a federal agent. Hands in the air. You're under arrest."

The suspect turns, eyes wide, hands rising, predator unable to believe he can also be prey. It occurs to Chaz that if he'd done things the other way, he could have made it back in time to dance for another couple of hours. *Opportunity cost*, he thinks, maintaining his sight picture with care.

Through the open gridwork of the parking structure, the sirens rise from the street.

Opportunities

Princeton, NJ, Spring 2005

Rohit Mehta has just run out for another quart of cream and a giant bag of takeout chicken, leaving Chaz Villette fussing with the bent-bladed old Braun coffee crusher, trying to get something like an even grind out of it. A burr grinder would be better, but you didn't find those at Goodwill very often. And coffee--coffee in quantity--will be required for the ceremonial packing-up of the office that has been their workspace, their home, their *den* for two years together.

Chaz measures out beans with his eyes--thirty, fifty, a hundred, three hundred and eighty, four hundred. To amuse himself, he converts to tablespoons--fourteen--and grams--fifty-one. He puts the lid on the grinder and presses down, feeling the whir through his palm.

This pot of coffee has a little something of ceremony about it. It won't be the last one they ever drink together, but it'll be the last one brewed in this cracked, yellowing coffeemaker on this stained wood-grain laminate desk. They've already packed up the hotplate and dishes. Tomorrow, Rohit's going to accept a job offer in Ohio. And Chaz--

Chaz, shaking grounds into the filter, is damned if he knows what he's going to do. He can stay here, but it wouldn't be a permanent position. Not yet, though of course things might develop. He can go to California, where the sun is hot and the waves and the women and the cliffs catch sleek highlights from it. He glances out the window, his chest full of needles. Ramona was from San Diego.

Or he can try Manhattan on for size, and see if a metropolitan region of 17,799,861 (2000 census: larger than the population of the Netherlands) can offer enough distractions to keep a lonely--and bored--assistant associate adjunct professor of statistics in sufficiently engaging trouble for a while.

He flips the switch. Something inside the coffee maker hisses. Something else New York City has: an awful lot of big buildings. It also currently has the most justifiably paranoid police force and private security in the nation, which would be an... interesting... challenge.

Brown, aromatic fluid drips from the opening in the coffeemaker basket. The drip becomes a trickle; the trickle matures into a stream. An aroma like roasted heaven fills the room. His stomach rumbles, and where is Rohit with the food?

Maybe, Chaz thinks, *you're having a hard time deciding because you don't want to be an academic, cowboy.* Well, he knew that going in. Grad school was a stalling tactic all along. Chaz Villette has always secretly intended to be a hero.

Now he has to decide what he wants to be when he grows up. Taking one of the job offers would at least give him a place to start. It's the logical and expected follow-up to a doctorate--or two--even if right now it seems like the first step down an endless tunnel toward cages and clipped wings.

You could always become a professional gambler. Or you could have taken the NSA up on their offer. But spookery doesn't really seem like heroing. He'd make a lousy firefighter: too clumsy. Maybe he could go into some kind of disaster preparedness or recovery work. That has potential.

He's wondering how you get to be a hero in New York City just as somebody beyond the open door clears his throat.

A flexible light baritone says "Doctor Villette, I presume?"

Chaz turns. The man in the doorway is about forty-five years old and about five feet seven inches tall. His broad nose is made broader by the lines framing an expressive mouth. His skin is a glossy horse-chestnut color five or six shades darker than Chaz's raw-sienna tan, his thinning hair cropped close to his skull in black coils. His suit is impeccable, his shoes shined, and he has small, deft hands which Chaz notices in particular because the right one is extended.

"I'm Chaz Villette," Chaz says, the coffeepot in his hand as an apologetic excuse not to shake.

The man glances at it and drops his own hand, countering with an easy, charismatic smile. "I'm Doctor Stephen Reyes of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and I can tell you what you are."

Daffodils

Howard University Hospital, Washington, D.C., January 2009

The next time Stephen Reyes opened his eyes, he expected to find himself alone, and he was. Alone in a hospital room with an enormous bouquet of yellow daffodils stuffed into a green glass vase, their cheeks pressed together so tightly the petals of their collars bent. He closed his eyes, unwilling to shake his head, but when he opened them again the flowers were still there.

"I wanted sunflowers," Delphine said from the door. "All kind of scraggly and textured, like oils, but you try to find sunflowers in January. You know, if I'd stuck with that sous-chef you stole me from, I could have saved a bundle in florist bills."

He was supposed to reply with something suave and witty, urbane. *What would Indiana Jones say at a time like this?* But Reyes's mouth hurt and his ribs hurt and everything else was a muddle of stiff and unhappy that he thought was probably pain, down there under whatever was dripping into his IV, and his concentration really wasn't so good at all.

"Daffodils are fine." Was that really his voice, smeared and whispery? He made a face. That hurt too. "They're beautiful."

She swayed into the room, all five-foot-eleven of her stacked up even taller on the two-inch heel of her plaid patent boots, her fat snaky gray-streaked dreads twisted back off her face with a gold headband. She filled up the doorway, broad-shouldered and full-hipped, in total possession of the room and herself. She bent over the bed and kissed him on the forehead, the side away from the bandages. "You look like shit. And I'm glad you're here for me to say that to. Just be thankful I didn't bring you a couple dozen beady-eyed stuffed animals to stare at you all night."

"Better than the nurses," he joked, which was unfair but funny. "Delphine, I'm sorry--"

She shrugged, so he dropped it. With one hand, she dragged over a big upholstered chair and settled down on the edge of it, her bright wool skirt falling into folds around her. Her earrings flashed when she lifted her head like a queen. He'd never seen her without lip gloss and eyeliner, and

apparently nearly getting himself killed wasn't about to change the way she presented herself.

She leaned close enough that he could pick up the scent of her skin and cosmetics. "No apologies. You got hurt, it wasn't your fault. Hazard of my job, don't eat the vermilion paint. Hazard of yours, random sociopaths. Agent Todd made your excuses. You know he's kind of hot?"

"Ow," Reyes said. "You could have just asked me to introduce you." As reassurance, it worked: he couldn't be that bad off if she was yanking his chain.

She laughed like a female version of Santa Claus: big and round and belly-shaking. Another day, less disorientation, less pain, and the laugh would have sent a warm shiver up his neck. Now, he didn't have the energy to miss it. He'd met her in front of her easel, bent over an image of the Georgetown waterfront, boardwalk and condominiums and sunrise and a few streaky charcoal-black suggestions of early-morning pedestrians. One of those pedestrians was Reyes.

She'd been painting it when he walked up and introduced himself, curious about this voluptuous Amazon with a painter's smock tugged on over a sweeping skirt and blouse and a streak of cadmium yellow in her hair. Everything about Delphine was on an epic scale--the curves, the dreadlocks that fell halfway down her back, that laugh. He'd said something funny; she'd laughed. He'd asked for her phone number five minutes later.

"More fun to arrange to have you kidnapped." She slipped her fingers into his hand. She kept her fingernails long, but unpainted, and the beige curves scratched his palm. Her gold bangle bracelets rang softly when she turned her wrist. "I suppose I could have just carried you home in my pocket."

He'd swat her with the back of his hand, but it seemed like a lot of effort. "You can carry me out of the hospital if you like."

She shook her head. "Doctor says four more days. Agent Todd said two. He also said I should let you rest, so once you've admired your daffodils, I'm out of here. You just let me know when I'm driving you home."

He started to protest. He could summon a car. He wouldn't be any trouble to her--

Her eyebrows went up, revealing a threatening quantity of the buttery whites of her eyes, and Stephen Reyes shut his mouth. When he opened it again, he asked, "How was your show?"

She smiled, teeth showing behind the edge of her upper lip. "Still hanging," she said. "But there are bids on all three of the big pieces, and it looks like at least half of the others will go. Maybe two-thirds."

The smile quirked up at the corners, a sure sign she was withholding something. A stab of disappointment. "You sold the Potomac painting."

"Couldn't," she said. "Doesn't belong to me. The guy I gave it to is going to need a new sofa, though."

"Pardon?" If he were himself, Reyes thought he'd be keeping up--he usually did, though nonlinearity was another epic trait when it came to Delphine--but she'd lost him on a hard turn somewhere back around couldn't.

"Bozo." She squeezed his hand, which didn't hurt. "It doesn't match your living room."

Something Strange

[editor's note: this is not in the reading order, but is linked in "Daffodils"]

Somewhere in America, March 2009

They settle into the plum-colored SUV: Brady driving, Todd in the passenger seat, Chaz in the second row with his legs stretched out diagonally. Brady skims his hands down the sides of the steering wheel and reaches for the ignition.

"Ceremony," Todd says, arresting Brady's fingers as they push the key in, before it turns.

Brady gives him a look across the center console, but Todd lifts up an unmarked CD as if oblivious. He turns it both ways with a magician's flourish, so it splashes light all over the inside of the SUV. Then he slides it into the player. "Now."

When Brady hits the ignition, the strains of Ray Parker Jr.'s "Ghostbusters" theme fills the car.

Brady sighs, a bubble of tension he hadn't even known he was feeling evaporating. "We're back."

"Thank God," says Chaz from the back seat. "For a second, I was afraid it was the mashup."

[editor's note: a link to "The Ghost That Feeds (Ray Park Jr. v. Nine Inch Nails"]

Ghost

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., April 2009

He'd released a ghost into the bullpen.

Reyes wondered why he hadn't expected it. Maybe because he'd been concentrating on the photos, and Villette, and whether the two, when combined, would require any special handling, and if so, who would be best to alert in advance about it.

In the end, he'd called Chaz in and explained that the photos had been rescued from the house before the fire got there, and held in evidence, but had now been released. He'd passed the manila envelope across his desk.

If Chaz needed special handling, he'd ask for it. All Reyes could give him now was self-determination.

Reyes watched without watching when Chaz rose from his desk chair and paced, steady as a drunk determined not to show it, to the copy room. He came back and worked a while at his computer.

Chaz talked to no one, and no one talked to him. But a silence moved around the room like a living thing. Reyes could almost see it brush one after another of the team, sending them out of the room to return quiet and self-contained.

If Reyes had still been a Catholic, he might have said that an angel moved among them, touching them, opening their souls a little wherever trouble had been shut inside. But angels were created in humanity's image, and human nature had angel nature within it.

Reyes didn't believe in angels, or ghosts. But something had been sealed inside that envelope with the photos of Adeline Villette, and passed now through the bullpen on the way to its rest.

Reyes wished it well.

standuponit's LiveJournal, Oct. 31st, 2008

[editor's note: this entry is not in the reading order, but is linked in "Ghost"]

standuponit WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.

So it's not a very *good* scanner.

mood: 👽ecr

music: The BoDeans - Fadeaway

So I just got called into the boss's office so he could give me something in a brown envelope. And it wasn't a pink slip.

[editor's note: picture not archived]

I think I totally have her nose.

I remember what she looked like, but I didn't have any photos before today. Some just found me. (My grandparents' house burned down last year, and I thought everything in it went, too, but the photos were saved by a first

responder. El Jefe said he didn't want to tell me until he was sure he could get them released for me. There are perks to this job.)

She would have been about seventeen when that was taken, and she looks older. Which is also like me, I guess.

...you know, if I put it on the Internet, it's forever. That's satisfying to think about.

Tags: mom

Posted at 12:06 pm

Jellybeans

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., April 2009

Hafidha smelled the coffee and heard the footsteps before they accompanied Chaz into the Sanctum Sanctorum. She leaned back, raising one hand to accept the mug he settled in it. She sipped, and sighed.

"Jellybeans," she said. "You always know how many are left in the jar." She didn't have to glance up at the top of the filing cabinet below Robert Smith's painted glower: he also knew where she kept them. And did his share of keeping the jar stocked.

"Five hundred," he said, "and sixty three." He perched himself on one arm of her sway-bellied office sofa: she really ought to bring in a piece of plywood to fix up the sagging springs. "Vegas is just full of weird little tourist promotions. You know those guess how many jellybeans contests?"

"Sure," she says. "Since we're talking about your mom, I'm also going to guess: you won 'em all for her?"

"Won her a car once," he said. "It was a Toyota Celica. She sold it and bought a Rabbit and paid the rent and groceries for almost six months. That was Lifesavers, though. We got to keep the candy, too. Wintergreen."

In her bicycle mirror, she saw his jaw work. "Wintergreen and butterscotch are the only ones that are worth anything."

"And the wintergreen ones spark in the dark." It gave him something to smile about, at least. "We ate out on promotions a lot, too. I'd count; she'd fill out the card. "Cause you must be 18 to enter.'" He shook his head.

She wondered, if she turned to face him, he'd vanish like mist. Like everyone else she loved and tried to hold on to. It was enough to make you think somebody was doing it on purpose.

Maybe it was just her not looking--or not looking like she was looking--that made it possible for him to talk. He still leaned forward on the arm of the sofa, hands dangling between his knees, not so much sitting as *lighted*, temporarily as a hummingbird.

She said, "You don't do that now. Enter contests like that."

"I cheat by breathing, Hafs."

"Nothing wrong with a little cheating. We can still go to Vegas and wipe out the slot machines when we want to retire." She waggled her fingers: obligingly, her desktop speakers cascaded chimes.

"And you can still get your kneecaps broken. We've talked about this. They won't wait to *prove* you're hacking the system."

Poor platypus. Still trying to play by the rules. "So I won't let 'em catch on."

In the mirror, she saw him frown.

"Don't worry. I'll save it for an emergency. So you cheated then: you don't cheat now?"

"They bug me." He rose from his perch, pacing from one side of the room to the other. The jellybean jar was an excuse, but he took it down anyway and rattled a handful out.

"Five hundred and fifty," she said, holding her hand up for a tithe.

"Forty-one, actually. Also, it's not a matter of keeping my mom and me fed anymore. I have a good job. And my only dependent is an invisible cat." He dropped a dozen Jelly Bellies in her palm. The top one was buttered popcorn and must have gotten into the jar by mistake. She ate it anyway. "So there was this one time when she handed in the entry, and they called us back after the contest was over to tell us we'd won. And I remember that the restaurant manager said something like, 'Wow, that's amazing! You came within two of the correct number!' I was five, and totally offended. My mom had to pull me outside and tell me, 'Honey, no. Don't say anything. 5,627 is a really big number. He couldn't hardly help but lose count. Don't you make him feel bad about it.'"

He popped a jelly bean into his mouth and sucked on it, hollow cheeks hollowing further. "That was her all over. Although that one was gummi bears. They squish. I could have missed one or two." He sighed. "You still got the cool superpower. I wish I had special effects."

"Dude. Invisible man! That's a special effect." Even though he hadn't told her. She folded her arms over her chest. Everybody had secrets. Even her.

And he had told her, kind of, hadn't he? He'd hinted. Those locked posts weren't for anyone else.

He'd also gone to see Daphne when he came back from Vegas, not her. But everybody had secrets. Everybody was on the outside of everybody else's life. It was just the way things were.

Finally, she turned in her chair. Watching him over her shoulder was giving her an eyestrain headache. "I wish I had a ChazCam. I wanna see what that looks like." It clicked in her head all of a sudden. "Hey, wait a minute. What if we do it together?"

"Did you turn into a mind reader while I wasn't looking?"

She waved a dismissive spiral in the air. "Your countie, my computer magic. I got what I was seeing on a screen for Daphs: I bet I could get what you're seeing on a screen for me. I'll start a model, you correct it, and we refine it until it looks right."

His expression suggested that he was the most dubious of platypuses. After a long stare at her eyebrows, he shrugged and said, "All right. I'll try."

"Okay, I'm ready with an .avi file. Here's what the jellybeans look like to me."

She spun back to face the desktop, feet tucked up under the mesh seat of her overpriced chair. Her monitor flickered, shimmered, then showed an image that might have come from a video feed: the jumble of bean shapes, the confusion of colors. She felt Chaz start.

"But that's just a--a random pile of colored things. Seriously? It really looks like that in your head?"

"It really does. What does it look like in yours?"

He stared from the screen to the side of her face, aghast. "But then you're crip--errrr, I mean... That *can't be* the way it looks to everyone?"

Oh, honey, if only you knew. "Well, I'm not everyone, but--No, sweetie-pie," she said. "You're special." Reaching up sideways, she patted him on the head.

He didn't wince.

"Tell me what you see."

"Empty jar," he said. With a flicker of thought, she gave him an empty jar.

"Then fill it up."

"Just fill it up? Boom?" Easy enough, but she felt him shaking his head before the image really settled.

"No, um. One layer at a time. Put a bean in and model where the next bean goes. And run a tally."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

Across the bottom, the first layer of jelly beans ticked into place, then the next, and the next. All the while a running tally scrolled up off the screen to one side. *Five hundred. Five hundred and eleven. Five hundred and twenty-four.*

It was over in a split second. She'd have to slow it down to watch it with her eyes, rather than the function in her head that handled machine code.

But the file was saved, and now she could run it at her leisure. Which she did, twice, while Chaz crouched beside her chair, too polite to lean over her.

"Like that?"

"There's no real, you know, stock ticker. I just kind of know. How many, how much they weigh, what the volume is. But yeah, more or less."

"Dude," she said. "That's a special effect. Right there."

He nudged her with his shoulder. "Yeah," he said. "I guess it is."

Next week on *Shadow Unit*...

"I've reviewed the photographs of the mutilated bodies," Frost said. "It would be better if I had the actual materials to work from, of course, but the local medical examiner is passably competent, and the images are detailed. Based on the way the bones are broken and the tissues stretched and torn, I would say that your subjects were forced into postures of prayer. Kneeling, hands outstretched and clasped together."

"Creepy," Daphne said, momentarily forgetting who she was talking to.

"Intentionally so, I would imagine," Frost said, surprising her. "If Agent Reyes has any questions, he knows where to find me. Have a pleasant day, Agent Worth."

*

Falkner narrowed her eyes. "You're saying you think there's more than one host? Based on the tissue and the gum?"

"Based on Tameka and Carrie-Ann. Based on Chaz and me." Hafidha gestured back and forth between them. "Based on Hope Mitchell and her mysterious partner and possible murderer." She looked around the room, took a deep breath, and looked right at Lau when she said three words everybody in the WTF hated. "Evolving anomaly model. There's evidence in this case to support it."

*

"I swear to God," Chaz said in someone else's voice, "Pearl, if you turn that boy into a sissy--"

Brady sat back hard enough in his chair that it left a scuff mark on the wall behind him. "Chaz, do not fucking do that again. Or I'll hurt you."

*

Sandy Cramer lifted her gaze. She smiled, leaning forward across the table, her hands spread flat on it now. "Oh, sweetheart," she said. "You really understand. You're like *us*. You *understand*."

*

Lau saw the moment before it happened. Half a moment. Half an instant. Not enough time even to draw breath, let alone cry out.

After that, she couldn't have been heard over the gunfire.

-- From "Not Alone," by Holly Black, Elizabeth Bear, Emma Bull, & Chelsea Polk

shadow unit

2.08 "Not Alone" - by Holly Black, Elizabeth Bear, Emma Bull, & Chelsea Polk

"We are born alone, we live alone, we die alone." -- Orson Welles

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Work the steps. That's what they tell you, and even though it's hard it's better than the other way. It's better than the craving gnawing at your belly. It's better than the aching sickness and the fog and your kids crying because they found you passed out on the floor in your own vomit.

The leader's hand is sweaty when he clasps yours as you enter the church basement. There was a time when he would have asked about your daughter, but not anymore. You have new members and only one leader to go around. And there are so many steps for him to guide you through.

You surrender. You are powerless. You surrender.

You scoot your chair into the circle and wipe your hands against your pants. No matter how many times you wash your hands, you still feel like they're dirty. You concentrate on the coffee cake and bright Jello salads and ham sandwiches piled on the table near the urn of bubbling coffee that you'll eat once the meeting is done. In your car, you've got a tray of sugar cookies carefully cut into the shapes of stars and laden with sprinkles. Your stomach cramps just thinking of all the food. Your fingers twitch.

You look around the circle, waiting for the final prayer. It frightens you, but at least you're not alone. By the time the hymn starts, your voice soars with the others. Together, it's harder for all the noise of the world to drown out your voices. Harder to be sucked back down into darkness. Together, you will be heard all the way up in heaven.

Sure and high and bright, like an arrow shot into the sun.

Holy, holy, holy.

Act I

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C. May 2009

If anyone had asked her--which, of course, they never did--Nicolette Lau would have said she made so many visits to the pistol range in the sub-dungeons of the Hoover Building because her team expected her to keep her skills honed. In fact, she went there to relax.

Shooting required absolute focus on her body, the target, and her immediate surroundings; it was the ultimate exercise of Be Here Now. Distractions upstairs in the sprawl of offices and meeting rooms and hallways, and particularly the corner where the Anomalous Crimes Task Force did its work, had to be left outside the sound-buffer door. She liked to come in early enough to have the range to herself. Isolated in her earmuffs and behind her shooting glasses, pushing herself to fire, reacquire her sight picture, and fire again as fast as she could while keeping her grouping tight and centered in the chest of the man-shaped target, she could push away everything that worried her.

She'd been getting in a lot of pistol practice in the last few months.

When she stepped into the aisle behind the shooting bays and saw that someone had arrived before her, she squashed a burst of irritation. When she realized the highly-reflective head under the tactical hearing protection belonged to BAU Unit Chief Victor Celentano, it turned neatly into what Chaz and Daphne referred to as an Emotionally Complex Response.

Celentano looked up from examining the slide on his pistol and saw Lau before she could decide whether she wanted him to. He was in his shirtsleeves, his tie loosened; the overhead lighting made the white cotton sateen and gray-on-gray silk glow, and the pale hair on his forearms glittered like metal. "Special Agent Lau," he said. He sounded cautious, which silenced her doubts. *He damned well ought to be.*

Sometimes the universe gave you a parking spot, a break in the weather, a chance for a private chat with the superior officer you'd been trying to corner. It rarely gave you a second one. "Sir. I wanted to talk to you about the Hope Mitchell case."

Celentano let his eyebrows rise a little and ridge his forehead. But the fraction of a second before he did it told Lau he was vulnerable, and knew it.

"Could we save this discussion for later in the day, in my office? Or were you thinking of this as a symbolically appropriate spot?" Someone else's eyes might squint and show laugh lines. Celentano's pale gaze was like a pin through a preserved insect, even when he was making a joke.

"Later in the day you're not *in* your office, sir. At least, not to...everyone. Why did you give the order to pull Mitchell out of ACTF custody?"

Celentano drew himself up--possibly out of instinct, though Lau doubted it--and looked down his nose at her, there below his chin. A Great Dane contemplating a Shih Tzu. She was aware, as he meant her to be, of the breadth of his shoulders and chest, the strength and agility in the long fingers that cradled his unloaded gun. His body language wasn't a threat; just a statement of fact. Then he turned back to his bay and his target and his box of ammo on the counter, dismissing her with a view of his profile. "I don't answer to you, Agent Lau."

Little dogs never quit. "No, sir. But you expect me to do my job. Part of that job is making sure the necessary information passes both ways through my team, so they and the rest of the BAU can support each other's mission." *Wow. Miss Junior Air Force.* She swept the recognition to one side. Later. Focus on the target.

"And you can't do that without knowing the basis for my decision?" Celentano methodically loaded his magazine.

"Two of your agents and a pair of local EMTs died. Hope Mitchell escaped, and was later found dead. Right now, your guys would like to know how my team let this happen. *We're* supposed to be responsible for people like Mitchell. As far as they're concerned, we let them down and got two of theirs killed."

Celentano laid the half-full magazine beside his pistol and turned to face her, his hands braced behind him on the counter edge. "And you know this how?"

"Because I ride up in the elevator with them every day," Lau fired back. Anger heated her face. "They need to be able to trust us, and we need to know they're not holding a grudge."

"And how do you suggest I get that across? An inter-departmental meeting? Agent Lau, who I *do* answer to is the Assistant Director, and the Director,

and a hell of a lot of people in the Justice Department. Do you think I wasn't called to account for the deaths of two agents in an agency with a damned low casualty rate?"

He'd made the call, and two agents had died. It ached like a wound. She could see it in his mouth, thin-lipped and folded closed at the end of his question, in the involuntary tiny spasm of a cheek muscle that needed to relax and couldn't, in the opening and closing of his fingers, white-knuckled, on the table edge. He called it a professional failure because the personal one would be too much to bear.

It didn't wipe away Lau's anger. But she remembered the horrible weight of that awareness: your mistake, other people's lives. "Sir, why *did* you give that order? We had Mitchell in custody. We had her trust, we understood her mythology and were already working with it. We thought we had the situation under control." *We thought we had* your *trust.*

Celentano took a breath that swelled the barrel of his chest and made his glossy cotton shirt pull snug, and let it out at a measured rate. "I did it because no one wants me up before the Senate Finance Committee, explaining how the BAU comes to have a budget line item for chasing Stephen King villains."

Lau felt her eyebrows pull together as she worked her way back through that. "Retired FBI agent found murdered, supervisory agent missing, DC area crime scenes--bogey on the news radar? I thought reporters just worked off the press releases nowadays."

Celentano snorted. "I hear cynicism kicks in younger every year. Mitchell was a high-profile collar. If I left her with the WTF, someone was going to notice whose handcuffs were on her. Then they'd check to see who'd been in those cuffs the last time, and where that suspect disappeared to, and the one before that... I had to break the connection between Mitchell and your team."

She stared into Celentano's face, looking for tells. She thought he was speaking the truth, or at least, most of it. "Move along, nothing to see here, we're just regular ol' profilers and field agents."

Celentano nodded--and relaxed, unless she missed her guess. "Luckily, there's only one Solomon Todd, and he's on our side."

Lau realized she'd brushed her suit jacket back from her hips and hung her thumbs in her trouser pockets. Aggressive nonchalance. "Wonder what the media would say if they knew we weren't on their side?"

He was turning back to his shooting bay; understanding reached, conversation over. That froze him in mid-motion. "In the ACTF's case, we're not. You know that."

"Is a low profile important enough that we should buy it with four--no, *five*--lives?"

Celentano picked up the magazine in front of him, held it up to the overhead light, put it down. Then he swung back to face her, shoulders up and chin tucked, like a bull that had charged the red cape and missed, and wasn't going to miss again. "I see the Reyes charisma has made another convert. You know, don't you, Special Agent Lau, that the longer you stay with the ACTF, the less likely it is that you'll ever move on?"

He used her rank and her name. He would remember this conversation, and what it meant.

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad we had this talk." Lau didn't smile, because he didn't expect her to. She nodded, as if bowing from the neck up, and went on down to the last bay of the row. There she slid the Taurus from its holster, checked the magazine, clipped a target to the carrier, and ran it out to 50 yards.

And thought the sentence she hadn't said aloud to Celentano: *What makes you think I want to move on?*

*

Lau looked around at her team and, by an effort of will, kept her mouth relaxed. She closed the door to the briefing room. It was cold in here, but now that they were together it would warm up.

Stephen Reyes sat stiffly upright in his chair that faced the door. His short-cropped hair had always been dusted with silver, but now the grey seemed more pronounced, though the new scars creeping through it were fading. Chaz Villette sat next to Daphne Worth, a little smudge of doughnut glaze on the corner of his mouth. He had his file spread out, studying the photographs

inside. Daniel Brady, directly across from Chaz, leaned back on the chair he'd turned around to sit like a saddle.

Hafidha Gates had dropped down next to Lau, sunken eyes on the screen of her phone as her thumb moved improbably fast over the keys. Finished, she dropped the thing into her googly-eyed monster laptop bag. Danny gave that a glance, but let it go, passing Solomon Todd--Duke--a case folder, then one to Esther Falkner, on his left and behind. Esther lightly touched Brady's shoulder. Duke cradled his coffee in his right hand, sipped.

They looked tired. They *were* tired. All the obvious wounds were sewn shut, the bruises even mostly kissed better. But Lau prayed this case would have something to focus their cleverness and their intensity on so they'd stop focusing it on one another.

Yes, Reyes' outreach initiatives seemed to be working. And just because they weren't sure the sole death was linked didn't mean it wasn't worth bringing in the ACTF. But damn if it didn't feel like Celentano was sending them out to dust the candlesticks.

Nikki gave everyone a moment to take the hardcopy versions of her slide show, and then clicked a button on her oval remote. "Yardston, Ohio. Population just over thirty thousand. It's part of the rust belt. Four bodies have been disturbed in a city cemetery in the past two months."

Brady stirred his coffee, watching the milk bloom. "You're telling me we're looking for grave robbers?"

Lau didn't answer, which was an answer in itself, she supposed. "First, Arron Wakefield. He died on September 25, 2005, at age fifty-eight, and was buried in the Laramie Memorial Cemetery. Then Greg Balezentis, age twenty-four, died June 13, 2008, same cemetery. Wakefield's body was found exhumed on March 4, 2009. Balezentis's body was found six weeks later, on April 17. Then around two weeks after that, on May 1, Cedric McLane and Tabatha Cramer's bodies were found on the same night. Cedric had died at age eighty-seven, on January 22, 1993--over fifteen years ago. Tabatha was an infant of not even twelve months when she died on December 10, 2005; she'd been buried for three and a half years."

Worth frowned. "This is a desecration of human remains case. Why send it to us?"

"Gross abuse of a corpse is a federal crime." Duke shrugged with elaborate disingenuity. "It's a *fifth degree* felony, admittedly. But it's...our jurisdiction."

"A few things." Lau clicked through three more slides, pointing. The forensics team had done their job: photographed their way into the scene and back out again. Every bit of necrotic flesh and yellowed bone catalogued in crisp detail. "The bodies were removed from both the coffins and the grave. The joints are cracked and broken. Look at the elbows and the jawbone."

Todd squinted at the screen. "As if someone was trying to reposition them."

"Except that it's not clear how." Lau nodded. "The joints are the *only* areas where there's cracking."

Chaz tilted his head. "It's as if the bodies moved themselves."

The case had wound a leisurely path through official channels before falling on the BAU's desk. No explanation quite fit. Finally, in exasperation, someone sealed up all the bits into a manila folder, tied it up in string and sent it down the hall. Reyes probably would have sent it back except that it came with a letter from Celentano. Not that that made Lau any more disposed to like the case, but she was very aware that the decision was out of her hands.

Chaz Villette leaned over the photographs, tracing the outlines of the shapes; committing each one to memory. "Necrophiliacs are unlikely to dig up a body. There was a necrophiliac in Ohio last year--Kenneth Douglas, who worked both as a coroner and in a funeral home. His method of finding fresh bodies via his workplace is quite common. Considering the stages of decomposition in this case"--he wrinkled his nose--"plus the differences in age and gender of the victims, I think we can rule out a sexual component."

"Someone married the Berlin Wall," Brady said. "You can never rule out a sexual component."

Lau tried not to smile.

"In 2004, a New Jersey cult was discovered digging up bodies to use in rituals," Hafidha said, with a small lift of her lip, like a sneer. "Satanic cults are way oversold by the media and usually turn out to be kids with too much pewter jewelry and too many wine coolers, but we could still be looking for something along those lines."

Worth nodded. "The police find anything interesting at the scene?"

"Multiple shoe prints," said Lau, pulling out one of the photographs from the spread and pushing it toward her. "Inconclusive. The graveyard is a pretty popular short cut between Yardston High School and an arcade of stores. Kids found the first two disturbed graves--Madison Brosnac and Tyler Ranier. Now it's closed off--officially--but you know how kids are, especially in a high-traffic area. Police force did some measuring of shoe prints and it looks like enough adults were present to support the idea of a group.

"After the second set of robberies, local authorities contacted the FBI for the first time. The case didn't get priority, however, until this." Lau hit the button.

The woman on the screen sat on a black and white checkerboard floor, leaning back against a once-white wall, now streaked dark brown. Her head was tilted, as though in sleep, but for the deep black line across her throat and the blood-drenched dress. A chef's knife rested clutched in her right hand.

"Madalyn Basuto, twenty-eight years old. Found April 23rd of this year in her own kitchen. The cause of death is listed as exsanguination due to the severing of the external jugular vein. Basuto was found holding the murder weapon in her right hand. In all ways, this seems unrelated to the exhumed bodies, except for the possibility of joint manipulation. Basuto was found with defensive wounds on her left hand. For that reason, the police initially investigated her death as a homicide. But the blood spatter suggests she cut her own throat with her right hand, and the medical examiner confirmed cadaveric spasm, meaning that the knife was clenched in her fist when she died. Basuto had an uncle with some local political connections, and he asked the Cleveland SAIC to see if there was anything he could do about it. The SAIC is apparently a pretty sharp cookie, because he looked at Basuto, looked at the grave robberies, and Houdini-Claused it up to Celentano's people."

Did she manage to get the name out smoothly, without a trace of her personal opinion? In front of a room full of profilers, it was hard to tell, but not even Reyes looked at her sharply. *Bulletproof.*

Chaz had glanced down abruptly, though--but when Lau studied him out of the corner of her eye, she thought he was reacting to something internal. Something internal, and something on the screen--

Aw, shit. The carving knife.

"So she was fighting herself off?" Hafidha asked. "Creepy."

"Could they be hesitation marks?" Worth asked. She glanced at Chaz. He must have caught the motion out of the corner of his eye; when she edged a hand toward him he shook it off. "Those would be common in a suicide."

"Or alien hand syndrome," said Brady. "Less common, I admit."

Lau thought of Eddie Cieslewicz. There could be someone else like him--but mythologies were intensely personal.

"Basuto's an interesting case," said Todd. "But the joint manipulation connection between her death and the exhumed bodies seems tenuous."

Falkner hesitated. "Greg Balezentis, the second exhumation, was Basuto's boyfriend. There may not *be* a connection, but it's starting to look like an awful lot of coincidences. It's possible there isn't a gamma at work here."

Brady raised a single brow. Lau hadn't known he could do that.

"It is possible there isn't gamma involvement," Lau acknowledged. "Maybe chasing fifth-degree felonies isn't a job for us. But messing around with bodies frightens and horrifies people, and these incidents are serial and an attack on the community, and besides, we've been assigned this case regardless, so this is where we're being sent." She shut her mouth with a snap and a sinking feeling. *So much for hiding our feelings from our fellow profilers.*

Todd leaned forward and cleared his throat. "Considering mythology--say we *are* talking about alien hand syndrome. Maybe the jammer can trigger the syndrome, perhaps even control the hand. Doesn't explain the graves, but we're still not sure they're connected."

"Somebody's sure," Brady said, with a dark look down the hall that filled Lau with warmth and gratitude.

Chaz raised his head so sharply that Lau thought he was going to excuse himself. But when he opened his mouth, a funny blurring came over him,

and Lau had a hurtful, sudden awareness of another presence. It wasn't exactly visual--Chaz was still Chaz--but there was a sense of another man's posture, graying, curling hair and uncomfortably bright eyes.

"I swear to God," Chaz said in someone else's voice, "Pearl, if you turn that boy into a sissy--"

Brady sat back hard enough in his chair that it left a scuff mark on the wall behind him. "Chaz, do not fucking do that again. Or I'll hurt you."

The blank face, the slouch that made his body look uninhabited: Lau recognized them just before Chaz let them go. He cringed. "Sorry. Sorry. Brady. I--"

"Chaz," Falkner said.

He looked guilty. Sick-guilty and maybe a little angry. Brady looked considerably more than a little; Lau was glad the width of the table lay between him and Chaz. Not that Brady would hurt a teammate. Would he? Lau clenched her fist around the remote and tried to keep her face from saying anything, especially not, "Fuck's sake, how about we all get a Valium and twelve hours' sleep and *then* we go see about the dug-up dead people?"

Falkner released Chaz from the Stare of Death. He and Brady were both avoiding eye contact, and maybe that was the best you could hope for now. Lau told herself it was an honest accident, Chaz's defensive mechanisms triggering by precisely the stimuli that installed them--a black-handled knife and a hell of a lot of blood.

Reyes stood, ending the standoff. Yes, of course he'd seen it. And let it pass, because that's what he expected of them, too. Put the job first. "Villette, Lau, Worth--you work on the disturbed remains. Gates and Falkner, we'll take the recent suspicious death. Brady, I know you're scheduled to testify this week and Todd, you've been requested for a consult down the hall. Everyone else, we'll discuss strategy further on the plane. Wheels up in an hour."

"I can reschedule," said Brady, as the others rose. "Prosecutor says this trial could take longer than global warming."

Reyes shook his head. "We'll call you in if we need to, don't worry."

Lau closed her folder and headed for the door, with the others. Her go bag was packed, waiting beneath her desk, but there were always calls. The local

police department to cajole, hotel reservations to make, flight path and landing itinerary to confirm, the cars to rent...

"A moment, Lau," Falkner said, low. Brady looked back at Nikki with sympathy and a shrug of his shoulders.

Falkner waited until the others filed out before saying, "You don't like this case."

Nikki turned one corner of her mouth up, raised the opposite shoulder. "It deserves good work, and we can provide that."

Supervisory Special Agent Falkner was not the sort to fall for Miss Junior Air Force. She waited.

"And I get a certain creepy feeling about the dead being raised from the earth and posed like mannequins. Which might be foolish."

"I don't like that part much either." Falkner did that thing, the commanding-officer unsmile. Miss Junior Air Force might not get past Falkner, but Madam Army Captain Ma'am worked all kinds of magic on Lau. She heaved a relieved breath, knowing it was ridiculous and feeling it anyway. Mom was here and everything was going to be okay now.

"I kind of had a fight with Victor Celentano this morning."

The thing about the team--the entire BAU--was that they were all so good at manipulating people that they understood their own reactions intimately. They were artists, and their art form was the human personality, pathological or otherwise. You almost never got an unfiltered response. So Falkner's amused snort and double-take were a gift, and Lau grinned to let her know she realized it.

Falkner folded her arms--not defensive, but maternal--and said, "Did you win it?"

"I...think so." Lau frowned. "But it's like winning a fight with Reyes. You're never quite sure if he meant that to happen. And then I get upstairs and the thing on top of my desk with an immediate action tag is *this*..."

"And you're fighting down adolescent rebellion and a concern that the entire point of this is to make us look bad."

"Shit rolls downhill," Lau said, looking at her shoes. "Victor has a career to protect."

Falkner nodded. "Your concern may not be unwarranted. But I also know that Celentano has protected this team when we *have* made mistakes--" She didn't say *Melinda Grossman*, and Lau was grateful, because Lau could say it to herself. "--and that in his own way he believes what Reyes is doing is necessary." She paused. "So what did he tell you about Mitchell?"

"That he was keeping Congress and the media out of our pockets."

Falkner sucked her teeth. "It could even be the truth."

"You're suggesting I give him the benefit of the doubt."

"I'm acknowledging that sometimes we have to put our shoulders in the politics and swim." She started to turn; hesitated. "Nikki, I need your understanding of how Hafidha is coping with her loss. And I need you to be honest."

Nicolette Lau's English muffin, two eggs, and locally-grown greenhouse grapes turned over in her stomach. "Chaz or Daphne could tell you more than I could, really." It was technically true. *Coward.*

"They could. But would they?" Falkner's eye contact was relentless.

Lau felt her shoulders droop under that gaze. "Their judgment is a little compromised. Maybe."

"They want to protect her. We all do. If that's your first impulse, that's admirable. But I need you to act on the impulse that protects all of us." And there was Madam Army Captain, calm professionalism and the safety of a trusted authority figure who would make sure it all worked out okay.

"She's doing better than I would," Lau said, although in truth, she had no idea how she would do.

"Is that all?" asked Falkner.

"She's angry. She's defended. She's withdrawn. She feels unfairly used by the universe and I don't think that's an unreasonable reaction. But she's doing the job." Lau couldn't quite look Falkner in the eye as she said it, but her expression of bland neutrality never wavered. Hafidha had seemed strained, but this was a job that hardened people. You had to get tough to block out

that much pain. Miss Junior Air Force would shut up and soldier, but that wasn't the way Reyes and Falkner ran their operation, and deep in her heart, Lau was grateful.

"I see. Thank you."

Lau nodded once, which was apparently enough to satisfy Falkner. Nikki was dismissed.

At her desk, Lau looked down at the careful stacks of papers, the clipped photographs and news stories. There were still calls to make, but not a single one of those calls were personal. Then she smiled. No one counting on her meant there was no one to whom she was accountable.

No one but her team.

*

Many people came to profiling because they were fascinated with darkness. Maybe even drawn to it. They wanted to know if evil existed. They wanted to know if it was made or born. Others came because of their awareness of something dark inside themselves. They wanted to shackle that darkness into service, catching people who were even worse.

Nikki Lau came to profiling because it made her feel alive.

She'd always been good at reading people's faces; good at hearing the echoes they didn't hear in their own words. Sometimes her brothers thought it was eerie, that she could tell when they were lying or when one of their girlfriends was about to break up with them. They thought it was like mind reading, but really it was just paying attention.

The downside was that people with secrets seemed more real to her than anyone else.

She loved waiting for people to trip themselves up, to reveal themselves in a fleeting wince or a poorly chosen word. Maybe it was the same part of her that loved the adrenaline rush of snowboarding or the physical chess of boxing. The part of her that wanted to turn everything into a contest. But that didn't explain why, in bars and on blind dates that never went anywhere, when she got bored and stared deep into men's eyes, she found herself looking restlessly for a glimmer of madness.

*

Falkner watched through a plane window as Chaz arrived on the tarmac with his go bag and backpack both balanced over one shoulder and a bulging cloth sack of groceries in the other hand. The last to arrive, he boarded and settled in one of the single seats near the fold-out table. Reyes leaned back on the cloud-grey upholstery of the couch with a comfortable sigh. Worth was already in her usual place, already unpacking her blanket for when the cabin got cold.

It worried Falkner how much the plane was starting to feel like home.

"What're we eating?" Hafidha asked, leaning forward eagerly. Little silver beads dangled from her braids today.

"There wasn't enough time for much more than a trip to the grocery store, but there are some very decent grocery stores," Chaz said.

Out of the bag he produced a small container of shriveled black olives, several wrapped sandwiches, a dozen white peaches, a bottle of cashews, a box of cheese crackers, and a bag of fresh coffee. Oil darkened the paper around the sandwiches. "Mozzarella and roasted peppers for Falkner and Lau, prosciutto and provolone or ham and brie for the rest of you. Take your pick."

"I'll make the coffee," Worth said, grabbing that bag like someone who was prepared to eat the grounds raw.

As the Gulfstream lifted off, Falkner stretched her sore shoulders and back against the chair. The muscle relaxants helped; the painkillers helped. The physical therapy was pure bloody murder, although at least the throbbing aches of the second day were starting to fade now.

Hafidha briefed them between bites on what she'd discovered. "Madalyn Basuto went to Marion Technical College for a year and a half before dropping out. Fortunately, colleges have message boards. A few months prior to her departure, I found several posts accusing Madalyn of being obsessed with one of the instructors there, a Richard Lewis, and warning people about her. Lewis is married. It could have meant an affair, but Basuto also has a rap sheet for petty larceny and took several trips to the emergency room for undiagnosed pain."

"Scamming for a scrip?" Lau suggested. She plucked the end of a pepper out of her sandwich, tipped her head back, and dropped it in her mouth like a

seal catching a piece of herring. Falkner didn't miss the way Chaz ducked his head and grinned.

Hafidha blew through her lips. "Ya think? Also notice, please, the pattern of erratic behavior, symptomatic of stress or trauma. She didn't list a next of kin when she entered the hospital, even though she has a sister, Janine, who lives nearby. And then about a year ago, Basuto was enrolled by a relative at the Merias Recovery Center to be treated for methamphetamine addiction. She left early because of a relationship that broke the rules of the facility. Nothing more specific than that in her file and no other patient was given a warning, so I'm assuming her inappropriate relationship was with one of the staff." Hafidha shook her head. "Taste for authority. Guess we all have a type."

"Is that supposed to be public record?" Chaz asked.

"Certainly not." Hafidha smiled and pinched up an olive between glitter-polished nails.

"Frost got the body," said Reyes. "She'll be taking a look this afternoon and letting us know if there's anything the Yardston coroner overlooked. In the meantime, we can talk to the sister and take a look at Basuto's apartment."

"Anybody got a better correlation between the disturbed bodies and our victim?" asked Falkner.

Hafidha looked smug. "Actually, I might. One of the deceased--Arron Wakefield--was a lifelong cocaine addict. He died of liver failure. Never attended any program or rehabilitation facility as far as I can tell. The infant--Tabatha Cramer--tested positive for methamphetamine immediately after delivery. She died of complications due to a defect in her heart. I can't find anything on her mother going into rehab either, though."

"Hmmm," Chaz said, reaching for a sandwich.

Act II

The city of Yardston, Ohio was of a type with midsized rust-belt towns. Give it a bigger river, and it could have been Harrisburg. If it were three times bigger and had a gorge and a renaissance, it might have passed for Pittsburgh. The closest field office was in Cleveland, which meant picking

up civilian rentals at the Toledo airport and hoping you didn't have to slap a flashing blue light on top like Starsky. Worth drove the navy-blue Mazda from the airport along a highway that cut through stretches of flat land, empty except for prairie dogs darting from mound to mound, while Chaz stretched out beside her and Hafidha leaned against brown vinyl in the back seat, pretending to read something on her Treo. The sky was the perfect blue of a paint chip and even though it was the middle of May, the air was cool enough to roll the windows down.

"Cute," said Chaz, indicating a prairie dog with one long finger. "They live in family units of a single male and three to four females. It's interesting because multiple partners--" He stopped himself as suddenly as if he'd bitten out his own tongue.

In the mirror, Worth saw Hafidha turn her gaze from the air in front of her to look out at the plains. She said nothing.

"They can also serve as a reservoir of the monkeypox virus," Chaz said, after a delay that told Worth he'd scanned his mental databases for a non-threatening silence-filler. "Yardston's demographics are pretty red state and Wonder Bread--working class, white, economically depressed people living lives much lower down the class totem than their parents did. That's a generality, of course."

In the back seat, Hafidha snorted. "It has a Wal-Mart, and people shop there."

"At least they're buying fresh produce," Worth said. The steering wheel felt sticky in her fingers.

They passed a line of billboards advertising restaurants and churches, then the old brick warehouses, welding shops, assembly plants, and a paper mill near a stinking river. Broken windows with lights behind them made it hard to tell whether the buildings were still in use. After that came the promised Wal-Mart ensconced amid its RV suburbs, a short arcade of stores, fast food restaurants, and a steakhouse.

Lots of places to hide bodies, thought Worth. She thought too of Tricia, probably still in her bathrobe, grading tests or reading. Her classes wouldn't start for an hour. Worth could almost see the tangled strands of hair falling

across Tricia's cheek and the way she licked her fingers before turning each page.

The memory made Daphne smile. No matter how far away she was, she carried Tricia with her. And when things got weird, as they inevitably would, at least she'd have that.

Worth pulled the rental into the hotel parking lot and the passengers got out. They split up in silence, dragging luggage to their own rooms. Her phone buzzed. Reyes.

MEET IN ROOM 203. TEN MINUTES.

*

Addiction is lonely. It's standing on a corner and freezing your ass off waiting for your dealer to come. It's convincing the people who once liked you and now just resent you to give you twenty dollars. It's turning tricks and lying to your mom. It's time slips and hurting all over and waking up sick every single day. It's telling yourself that tomorrow will be better, that an hour from now will be better, that it will be better right after one more hit or sip or sleep.

It's looking through cloudy glass because you can't bear the pain the light brings. It's about trying to blot out the pain of the world. It's about trying to blot out the pain of being alone.

You won't go back to that. You'll put yourself in God's hands. God will remove the defects of your character. God will lead you to confront your past, to confront yourself, open yourself up to the light. If only you open yourself to the word of God, you will be made whole and joyful. You will pray and be heard!

I will show you how to kill your addiction before it kills you. I will kill it dead.

*

After a night spent with the team, going over police reports and brainstorming--*strategizing*, Reyes reminded himself, while privately rolling his eyes at the human predilection for euphemism--Reyes and Falkner arrived on Janine Basuto's doorstop early the following morning. Hafidha had gone ahead to Madalyn Basuto's apartment with an officer. She wanted

to get a start on any computers she found and, besides, three people made for an intimidating interview.

Janine Basuto's ranch house was in decent shape--grass mowed, scraggly spreading junipers around the foundation weeded, gutters rusty but secure--but the neighborhood wasn't exactly the sort of place you expected someone with political connections to live. Still, Reyes reminded himself, an uncle could be distant and still want peace of mind when it came to his niece's suicide.

He rapped on the door twice while Falkner took out her badge.

The woman who answered had close-cropped mahogany curls and a small child on her hip. Even seen through the screen door she looked older than the twenty-three years the Department of Motor Vehicles said she was. Tiny lines around her eyes, mouth, and on her forehead, and the dulling of her skin, suggested the kind of sleep deprivation one got from parenthood. Especially single parenthood. Her earlobes were studded with a dozen or so faint holes per ear, but she wore no jewelry. Little hands grabbed for shiny things; one got out of the habit after a while. Her button-front shirt was clean, washed soft, and only a little too tight through the bust and hips.

The little girl's Hannah Montana t-shirt and flowered pull-on jeans were new, and her hair was brushed shiny and clipped back with a zigzag pattern of tiny iridescent plastic claw-clips. Her nose was running just a bit. If Chaz were here, would he whip an unexpected tissue out of his pocket and wipe it for her?

Reyes gave Basuto his best we're-not-really-cops smile. Her eyes stayed on Falkner's lopsided gold shield with the lopsided eagle.

"Ms. Basuto, we spoke on the phone," said Falkner.

"Yes. I just put on some coffee," she said, thumbing the useless lock on the screen door latch and holding it open. "Come on in. You got here fast." She didn't look happy with the idea of the FBI in her house--hardly anyone ever did--but in a way that spoke of long resignation. She seemed too tired to be nervous.

Janine Basuto ushered Reyes and Falkner in and onto her flower-printed couch. She went into the kitchen and came out with a pot of coffee and mugs threaded on her fingers. In the moments she'd been gone, though, Reyes had

noticed plenty. Worn furniture and pages of fingerpainting tacked up on the walls. No photographs. Eventually the little girl's school picture might appear on an end table. But even Sears photo studio portraits cost more than a single mom could afford, especially if there was no one clamoring for copies. A vase with withered wildflowers perched on the TV next to the digital converter box. *Mommy, these are for you*. Nice place.

"You two live here alone," Reyes said. It wasn't a question.

Basuto's daughter walked behind her with a glass of juice. She looked about four and sat down near her mother's feet when Basuto lowered herself into a chair.

"We do. You take sugar?" she asked. "I've got some of those hazelnut fake cream things too."

"This is perfect," said Falkner. "Can you tell us about Madalyn?"

"She was a good girl. My big sister. Our parents divorced when we were really little and she was always there, protecting me." Basuto looked out the window and then, almost unconsciously, reached out to touch the top of her daughter's head.

"We understand she had some trouble in college," Falkner prompted.

"She didn't like to talk about it, but I guess that was when she got into the drugs. Her using got pretty bad. Something happened, I guess. Probably a man. There's always a man."

The little girl pulled on her mother's sleeve. "Mom, where's my bo-bo?"

"Excuse me," Basuto said. She followed the girl into one of the bedrooms, then came out a few moments later with an apologetic smile.

"I was no angel either," she said. "I'm not judging Lyn."

"Of course," Reyes said.

"She got cleaned up."

Falkner nodded encouragingly. "Did she have any help? Go somewhere?"

Basuto snorted and pointed back toward where her daughter had come from. "We didn't have the cash for that kind of thing. I sent Mary to go stay with her father and locked Lyn in my bedroom with a mattress on the floor. She

broke my window and busted the plaster, but she rode out the worst of it. Right there."

Reyes smiled. There was nothing he liked so much as resourceful women. "Old school."

Basuto laughed and her smile seemed sincere for the first time.

"What was Madalyn's relationship to Greg Balezentis?" Reyes added. He watched Basuto's face close up like a body shop in a bad neighborhood and fought back the impulse to apologize. When Basuto's head pivoted a little away, when she muzzled herself by lifting her cup to her lips, he said, "That's old business now, I know. But sometimes it's useful for us to gather facts about the victim's past." Meaning, *This is an old hurt. You can tell us, and let it go.*

Basuto swallowed, and not just coffee. "She lived with him on and off. They were both using. He died of smoke inhalation from a kitchen fire."

He caught Falkner's eye, so it was Esther who said gently, "She blamed herself."

In a stronger voice, Basuto replied, "That's why she got clean. But it wasn't her fault."

"What happened after that?" asked Falkner.

Basuto shook her head. "My Uncle Mike--he's part of the Governor's staff, funny how my mother and him can be so totally opposite for being brother and sister--found out about something Lyn was charged with over a year ago and told her she had to go to rehab. Imagine that, she gets clean and *then* goes to rehab. But he agreed to pay. Said she was making him look bad."

Falkner waited, attentive, hands closed over her knees. Reyes realized his pose was nearly identical. Basuto wasn't looking at either of them. Her coffee was cooling in front of her. She was in the throes of the story now.

"Didn't last long in there, but I guess it did her some good. She seemed to be getting her life together." Basuto's eyes shone with sudden wetness and she blinked a few times. "She got a job--she was waitressing. She was even volunteering, teaching Sunday School at First United Methodist over on Main. I don't know why she decided to--I don't know why she killed herself."

Falkner put her hand on Basuto's arm. She expressed empathy differently than Todd or Lau might have: she was solid, sincere, an authority figure who understood and could be depended on to correct the paperwork, expedite the case, return with answers. "Do you know anyone who might have wanted to hurt her?"

Basuto wiped her eyes. "What's this all about? You don't think it was suicide?"

Reyes leaned forward. "We're just trying to investigate all angles."

She looked over at Reyes as though waiting for the real answer. The exhaustion on her face had been replaced by hope. She looked like a woman who'd been carrying around a terrible burden and saw a chance to set it down.

"We don't know what happened to your sister," he said. "We really don't know the answer yet. We don't even know if there's a question. But we treat every case as significant and every victim as an individual of importance."

Basuto nodded. "She didn't have any enemies. She'd met a nice girl at work and they were going together to the Narcotics Anonymous meetings, but it's not like she was even dating. She took her recovery seriously. She said she was on the seventeenth step."

"Seventeenth step of what?" Falkner asked.

"Of the program," Basuto said. "She was really proud."

Reyes glanced at Falkner. Her look of revelation would have been opaque to anyone who did not already know her.

"There are usually only twelve steps," she said.

Basuto looked between them, a slight crease between her brows. "I guess I misunderstood."

Reyes leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, making his body language intimate, confiding. "Did she ever talk about anyone else in her support group? Do you know the name of the woman she worked with?"

Basuto shook her head. "Maybe... Lyn might have mentioned it, once, but--" She shrugged.

"Did you ever meet her sponsor?"

"I didn't. That's not weird, is it? She was very insistent that it was confidential."

That got a sharp glance from Falkner. Addicts in recovery usually talked about their recovery a great deal. Reyes pressed the issue. "Where did Madalyn attend meetings?"

Now the crease was deep enough to wedge a quarter into. "I don't know," she said.

*

Laramie Memorial Cemetery was a lot less empty than Worth had hoped when she got out of the rental car with Lau and Chaz.

Chaz leaned back on his heels, his long body arching like a drawn bow. His head turned like the turret on a tank scanning for enemies. Following his gaze, Worth saw a grassy sweep dotted with mostly-modern tombstones and carefully preserved trees. A few crypts dotted the top. A local would probably call this a big hill; to Worth's Pennsylvania-bred eyes, it looked like a courthouse lawn.

Three cars from the Hancock County sheriff's office were parked by the stone gates at the entrance and several uniformed officers waited for them. "I think they want to impress us," Chaz said.

"No kidding," said Lau, with a grimace. With her eyes, she gestured Daphne into the lead. Calculated manipulation, exploiting the local demographic, but it didn't make Daphne any happier.

We're not here to confront people. We're here to find a killer. Assuming there is a killer. Pick your battles, Harpy.

And watch your assumptions, she reminded herself shamefacedly as a thickset, grey-haired man with a surprisingly conspiratorial grin cut through a crowd of young clean-cut white male deputies who could have walked right out of any cop show from the 1960s, shook each hand in turn--starting with Lau and ending with Chaz--and introduced himself as Sheriff McKinley.

"Come on," he said. "We're glad to have the help; we don't have much of this sort of thing here. I'll show you what you came all this way to see."

Worth watched as the Sheriff's department peeled back tarps and revealed the gaping holes dotting the cemetery. In the distance, she could hear the cheers from the field hockey game going on in back of the high school.

"Thought it was a prank," Sheriff McKinley said. "We've had a couple of headstones stolen before, a little graffiti. Sick prank, sure, but you know how these heavy metal kids are with their fake Satanism. Like those kids in Texas who dug up a body to make the skull into a bong."

"Right," Lau said, in a tone Worth thought carefully balanced respect and incredulity.

Chaz looked toward the school and then back at the Sheriff. "At night, you can't see this spot from the road, can you?"

He shook his head.

"But that grave over there," Chaz pointed toward where Cedric McLane was buried, higher up the hill. "That would have been visible from the parking lot of the convenience store."

"That's true," said the Sheriff, squinting. "There's not a lot of traffic, but the mart's open twenty-four hours."

"So they weren't choosing these graves at random," Worth said. "These aren't crimes of opportunity. They were taking a risk digging up a grave when they didn't have to. Something connected these four bodies." *Addiction.* The obvious answer, but could it be that easy?

"Yeah," Sheriff McKinley said. "Addiction." Worth bit back a laugh, and he spread his hands as if he followed her thought process exactly. "But that's half the damned town, begging your pardon, Special Agent. There's not a lot left to do in Yardston except watch the Late Show, make babies, and shoot up."

"You don't seem surprised that the Cleveland field office linked the Basuto death. You must have had a suspicion something bigger was going on to involve them in the grave robberies in the first place. Is addiction also what led you to that conclusion?"

He nodded, but the way his hand touched his throat when he did it was a tell. He didn't really believe what she was saying, but it was the plausible explanation.

Lau saw it too. "Not the trauma to the joints and the posing of the bodies?"

McKinley started walking again, slowly, leading them away from the knot of deputies. "I guess you guys see some weird things," he said, and then hesitated. As one, the three agents gave him a silence to fill. "There's this memo that went around, with a contact number. Suggesting that the FBI has a task force interested in weird crimes in particular, and the earlier the better. Before things--what's the word?"

"Escalate," Chaz supplied reflexively, and then his lips twisted into his frog-face.

"Right," said McKinley. "Before they escalate. So I called the Cleveland office, and it turned out the, what do you call him? The Special Agent In Charge? Was already looking into connections."

Damn, Worth thought. *Tell me the outreach is working.*

What she meant to say was something else entirely, but Lau beat her to it. "You did the right thing," she said.

Sheriff McKinley sighed like a gust of winter. "You ever seen anything like this?"

"Not exactly," said Worth carefully. She was pretty sure McKinley wanted to know that the FBI didn't think his department were a bunch of idiots for not solving the crime, and Lau had made a good start on establishing a rapport. "Anomalous crimes by their nature tend to be unique."

"The holes are dug with a lot of precision," said Chaz, shaking his head. "The UNSUB had enough strength and endurance not to cut corners and was familiar with a shovel. I think we can conclude the same person dug up all four graves. And brought lifting tackle or a come-along in order to shift the vault lid--"

"No vaults," said McKinley, making all three agents' heads turn.

"Isn't that unusual?" Worth asked, just as Chaz said, "I know they're not required by Ohio law, but surely that's unusual?" Their two voices said the duplicated word at the same time, a little like a chorus, and despite the grimness of the scene Chaz caught her eyes on his mismatched ones and let the corner of his mouth quirk up.

You took your bonding where you could find it.

"It's cheaper to bury without," McKinley said. "None of these families were wealthy, and Laramie Memorial is the old cemetery." He rubbed his hands together like a man dusting dirt from the palms. "It doesn't require them."

"Cheaper to bury." Chaz tucked two fingers inside the unbuttoned top button of his shirt collar and gave it and his tie-knot a loosening tug. Maybe being in a graveyard made it easier to pick out the sound of J. Edgar, revving up for another spin. "Easier to exhume. That could be a factor in selection."

"The bodies aren't the same race, not the same age," Lau said. "Not the same gender. Maybe these are all people the UNSUB knew?"

Worth's phone rang and she picked it up without looking. "Hello?"

She was probably imagining Frost's sniff of disapproval that Worth had failed to properly identify herself. "This is Madeline Frost. I have your report," she said in a tone that made Worth stand up straighter.

"You should probably tell Falkner or Reyes. I'm working the disturbed remains."

"Agent Reyes didn't pick up; I suggest you tell him that if he needs to hear this from me, he's welcome to call. I will spare us both a reiteration of what you've already read in the coroner's report. There were no hesitation marks, which is uncommon in suicides. Each strike, even the defensive wounds, cut all the way past subcutaneous tissue. Additionally, the cadaver presented as emaciated."

Worth winced at the word, looking at Chaz's thin frame as he bent down to sift through dirt. "How emaciated?"

"It's not inconsistent with status gamma," Frost said. "No malnutrition present. Her G.I. tract contained residue, and plenty of it. Candy mostly, but she was eating."

"I'll pass it along," Worth said. Wouldn't it be nice if the problem had already resolved itself? Convenient.

Of course, that made Worth pretty certain it wasn't the case.

"Do. Additionally, I've reviewed the photographs of the mutilated bodies. It would be better if I had the actual materials to work from, of course, but the

local medical examiner is passably competent, and the images are detailed. Based on the way the bones are broken and the tissues stretched and torn, I would say that your subjects were forced into postures of prayer. Kneeling, hands outstretched and clasped together."

"Creepy," Daphne said, momentarily forgetting who she was talking to.

"Intentionally so, I would imagine," Frost said, surprising her. "If Agent Reyes has any questions, he knows where to find me. Have a pleasant day, Agent Worth." With that, Frost ended the call.

A pleasant day of corpses. Daphne walked back toward her teammates, feeling her brain already starting to grind away at the new information. *Who would want to see the bodies of the dead posed as if in prayer?*

"Daphs, Nikki," Chaz called. "Come and take a look at this."

When they came up to him, Chaz squatted in front of Tabatha Cramer's grave, holding a balled-up tissue caught by a long pair of tweezers. "New. I found another one over there and bagged it." He pointed at where the hill sloped down to the road.

"So I'm standing in front of an open grave," Lau said, backing up a little. "I'm crying. Did I really dig up that grave? Doesn't quite play."

"Maybe Tabatha's mother came here after the grave was disturbed. The area was sealed off, but just with crime scene tape and a single patrol car," Worth said. "Kids were moving through."

"Check this out," said Chaz, bending down and then straightening. "Gum." He held it up to the sky. "Nicorette, I think."

Worth shook her head. "Someone cries and someone else chews gum? Who are these people?"

"Whoever dug up these graves targeted them specifically," Lau said. "If seeing the bodies upset them, we have a better sense of the profile. Once we get the DNA off the tissue and the gum, we'll know a lot more."

Worth nodded, looking down into Tabatha's tiny grave. The empty socket of the hole stared back. "That was Frost on the phone," she said. "She's got something interesting."

*

Hafidha Gates arrived at Madalyn Basuto's apartment armed with a 64 gigabyte flash drive, a set of lock picks, a collection of evidence bags and cards, and a Sheriff's deputy. The deputy was named John Fight, and he was as standard-issue as everything else in the kit--white, late-twenties, blue on blond in a wan Germanic fashion.

Downtown Yardston was a wasteland of once-gracious nineteenth-century masonry, construction cones, and caution tape strung around holes in the crumpled pavement. The few people moving about on a Saturday morning looked as dusty and out-of-sorts as their city, prone to worn feed caps or cheap bright finery from *Targét*. Hafidha felt like a Dutch Capuchin among street pigeons, and the truth was that more than a few of them turned to stare.

She drew herself up, braids swinging, nails and rings a-sparkle in the morning sun. *A credit to the job and yourself.*

The lockpicks weren't needed to get in--Fight slit a seal, produced a key, and recorded the entry in a logbook. The door opened into a sort of coat closet-cum-mudroom; immediately beyond that lay a fairly good-sized kitchen with appliances that probably hadn't been updated since 1980. A brown puddle had dried under the refrigerator. Below it, the floor pitched sharply down at an angle that made Hafidha wonder if the joists were really all that.

The apartment itself was more or less what Hafidha had expected. Not exactly grimy, not quite in a state of junkie disarray--Madalyn was obviously making some effort, and the dishes were washed and the garbage taken out--but it had that dingy look of a place inhabited by somebody who didn't have the knack of or the interest for housekeeping. There were a few dead plants, but from the dust on the leaves, they had predeceased Basuto.

"Good thing she didn't have a cat," Fight said, frowning at a withered begonia.

Hafidha looked at him appraisingly, abruptly considering him as something other than furniture. He looked back, then glanced down and blushed. "I'm sorry, Special Agent, I--"

"Was being funny," she said cheerfully, and breezed past him into the living room while he gaped after her. At least he collected himself quickly and followed.

Hafidha Gates, authority figure. What will they think of next?

No computer. She hadn't really expected one. There was a television and DVD player, a telephone and answering machine. No messages. The police would have already retrieved those. No books, no desk. A pile of unopened mail and fashion magazines on the glass-topped coffee table. Something in the pile caught her attention--a ragged edge of a torn envelope. Good paper, pale yellow, not the stuff bills came in.

Hafidha slid a nitrile glove on--those things were brutal on your cuticles--and slid paper aside until she touched the edge. She tweaked it loose. It was a greeting card, stuffed back into the envelope it came in.

She looked at Fight. Fight nodded, an evidence bag in his hand. Carefully, Hafidha shook out the card.

It was white with bold red lettering. On the front it said LET GO OR GET DRAGGED. Inside, it said SURRENDER. Below that was handwritten "Six months clean and sober. Congratulations! Love, Peter."

"Narcotics Anonymous slogans," Fight said. "You think Peter was her sponsor?"

Hafidha nodded. "Good guess." She turned the card over. "Peter Kaczmareck. There's an address. I'll put him on the interview list."

The rest of the apartment presented no new surprises, and wasn't big enough to keep them more than an hour. As the door shut behind them and the deputy dug in his pockets for a fresh seal, Hafidha took a breath. Boys who lived halfway across the country were especially good. "Deputy Fight. Would you like to get a coffee sometime, when this is over?"

He shook his head. "I'm flattered, Special Agent. But I'm engaged."

She felt the thing her mouth did, and knew it couldn't be attractive. "Of course you are. She's lucky."

*

Falkner stood on the steps of the Yardston Community Center and watched the unmarked patrol car pull into the parking lot. Unmarked or not, anyone in law enforcement could spot one with ninety percent accuracy. Hafidha swept out the front passenger door with a swagger of braids, boots, and big

punk-plaid messenger bag, and the car pulled cautiously away and back onto the street.

Hafidha studied the building and rolled her eyes. "Any community that centers on a cinder-block pizza box has serious problems."

"They do seem to have those," Falkner said, "but architecture isn't one of the ones we can help with."

Hafidha's lips twisted, and she dropped her gaze to her pointed toes. Falkner took that to mean the course correction had been noted. "Did you find anything at Madalyn Basuto's apartment?" she asked. She had enough experience with Bekk and Deb to get the tone right, to make sure she wasn't saying, *Did you do what you were supposed to?*

"Another name to chase: Peter Kaczmareck, and I hope that's even sort of how it's pronounced. Maybe Basuto's sponsor. At least, he sent her a jolly congratulations card emblazoned with a Twelve-Stepper's idea of positive slogans."

"Which are?"

"'Let go or get dragged.' But wait, there's more. The inside text said, 'Surrender.' If the thing hadn't been commercially printed, you'd have thought it was manufactured by Precious Serial Killer Moments."

Falkner couldn't suppress a reflexive upward bounce of her eyebrows. "Whatever happened to 'Let go and let God?'"

"Es, you missed the memo. Civility is dead."

Two frowning middle-aged women came out the community center door carrying stiff plastic flower arrangements. "Excuse me," one said coolly, giving both Falkner and Hafidha an up-and-down look, though there was room to pass single-file on the steps. The other woman gazed away and down, as if they were on the other side of the street. Hafidha smiled broadly at them. When they reached the parking lot, she turned to Falkner and said, "I rest my case."

Falkner shrugged. "Let's go see if we can keep anything else from dying." They passed through the doors and into the echoing hard-surfaced guts of the building.

There were two NA meetings advertised for Yardston -- the one at the community center and one at All Saints Episcopal Church. Both of them had the same contact listed: Simon Talliwell. Hafidha had triangulated between Madalyn Basuto's job, her home, and her sister's place. This was the closest meeting.

The young man sitting at the front counter looked clean-cut and conservative, with close-cropped dark hair and a pressed madras plaid shirt. The ladies with the plastic flowers probably approved of him. When he smiled, though, he smiled at Hafidha, while doing a not-very-good job of trying to gawk inobviously at her scoopneck shell and petrol-blue crushed velvet jacket.

"What can I do for you?" he asked her.

Falkner glanced at the nameplate on his desk--Brian Wilson, and he was young enough that his parents should have known better. "Mr. Wilson, we're looking for the person in charge of the NA meetings. Is he here?"

"That's supposed to be confidential." Wilson folded his hands primly on the countertop, lifting his chin with the sort of obstinate helpfulness Falkner associated with receptionists everywhere. It was probably meant to be flirting. The whole business made Falkner feel old.

"Mr. Talliwell's name is on your website," Hafidha said. "It's not *that* confidential."

He grinned. It stretched his cheeks and made his chin stick out like an unrepentant ten-year-old's. Falkner supposed he got a lot of mileage out of that grin. "I guess not. What are you looking for him for?"

Falkner drew out her badge and showed it to him. "He's not in any trouble," she said. "We're hoping to talk with him."

"He's got a private practice," he said. "Left a couple of his cards here. Let me get you one. But he doesn't run this meeting anymore. I haven't seen him in a couple of months."

"The card would be great," Hafidha said, giving him a smile that could peel paint. Falkner knew Hafidha had already found Talliwell's number, but Falkner was glad she was playing along. Maybe the boy would give up

something else in an effort to impress her. Hafidha was a hard lady to impress.

Wilson scribbled something on the back of a business card and handed it over. Hafidha glanced at it, nodded thanks, and rattled the card against her nails.

Falkner cleared her throat to haul Wilson's attention back and held out a snapshot of Madalyn Basuto in happier times. "Maybe you could tell me if you saw this woman? We're not asking if she's in NA. I'm just asking if you saw her here. I'm sure there are a variety of activities she could be participating in."

His gaze flickered from Falkner to Hafidha and back, as if it had just occurred to him that this might be about something large and serious. "That's the girl who killed herself."

Neither Hafidha nor Falkner nodded.

"I've seen her," he said, "but not in a long time. She and a friend of hers used to come here, but I think they found another group. Dr. Talliwell started some other meeting and a couple of the regulars left to join it."

How often does an NA meeting have a schism? Falkner looked at Hafidha, and found Hafidha looking back.

"Friend?" Hafidha asked.

He rolled his eyes. "'Anonymous,' remember?"

"Do you know a Peter Kaczmareck?" Falkner asked, hewing as close as she could to Hafidha's pronunciation.

Wilson's features pulled toward each other as if someone had tightened a drawstring around his nose. It looked like distaste. "Yeah. Now there's a guy who thinks his sh-- sweat doesn't stink."

"That bugs you?" Hafidha asked.

"Some of us remember the Pete that useta was, is all." Wilson shrugged. "But I guess he's an upstanding citizen now."

Falkner tucked the photo of Basuto away. "Does Kaczmareck come to meetings here?"

"Like I say, confidential." Wilson's mouth twisted. "But you gotta hope he goes to meetings *somewhere*."

Which sounded to Falkner like, No, Kaczmareck doesn't come here.

Hafidha said, "Who runs the regular meetings here?"

"Sally Cotter," he said. "You can contact her through the treatment program at the local hospital, or--" he rummaged. "--I have a phone number here."

Falkner accepted another business card, this one pale peach. She only got her hand on it because Hafidha had stepped back from the desk. "Do you like her?"

He smiled. "She's a lot more relaxed than Doctor Talliwell. He can be--" he shrugged. "Doctors, you know? Ego fiends. And then there's the whole born-again thing."

"Have you heard anything about the other meeting? People must talk sometimes."

"Dr. Talliwell runs it. You should just ask him."

"We will," Hafidha said, holding up the paper he gave her. "We really appreciate this."

"Good," Wilson said, and might have been about to add something else smarmy when Hafidha turned on her heel. His grin followed them down the hall, leaving Falkner momentarily grateful for the invisibility of middle age. Outside, Hafidha handed the card to Falkner like a cartoon housewife picking up a dead rat. Falkner noticed he'd added his own number to the back of Simon Talliwell's card.

"Pork and corn," Hafidha said. "Too much in the diet leads to holes in the brain. And testosterone poisoning."

Falkner grinned at her sidelong. "You know I grew up in St. Louis."

"So you're saying the sensitivity is gender-linked? Ye gods and fishies, what a *flatline*. Do they really think dumb is cute?"

Falkner rocked back, startled. Hafidha was already stalking away, arms swinging, the heels of her skull-and-crossbones boots clicking on pavement.

She's grieving, Falkner told herself. *People act in uncharacteristic ways when they're under stress. They express anger they'd never acknowledge otherwise. They act on impulses they have the sense to suppress when things are normal.*

But the anger and the impulses were there all along. Everyone had them, didn't they? It was what one did with them that drew the dividing line between socially acceptable and...not.

Falkner thumbed the phone number on the front of the dead-rat business card into her phone. "Dr. Talliwell's office," a pleasant, male, professionally-bored voice declared. Answering service.

"This is Supervisory Special Agent Falkner of the FBI. I need to reach Dr. Talliwell immediately. It's about the safety of one of his patients." *The exact truth. Well played, Esther.*

The operator no longer sounded bored, but he didn't sound hopeful, either. "I'll try to get a message through to him, Ma'am--Officer. But he might not check until morning. We don't have an emergency number for him."

Falkner gave him her number anyway, thanked him, and disconnected.

Hafidha slouched at apparent ease against the fender of their borrowed car, her oversized messenger bag slung behind her, arms and ankles crossed. She stared across the street at a row of quaintified renovated storefronts. They neither pleased nor offended her, judging from her expression; they were just something that blocked the view of whatever they were built in front of. Just there.

"Are you all right?" Falkner asked, though she knew better than to expect much.

"Sure." Hafidha's gaze, turned to Falkner, was clear, open, alert. "Talliwell's home address next?"

"You already have it?"

"Tcha. I can't spend *all* my time playing Bejeweled."

But when they reached Talliwell's townhouse and rang the bell, there was no answer. When Hafidha summoned up his landline and called it, they could hear it ring from the other side of the door, but no one picked up.

His cell phone, of course, was powered off.

Act III

By the time Chaz, Worth, and Lau got back to the hotel for First Dinner, Reyes was already present and ordering room service in quantities even Chaz found gratifying. "What Celentano really hates us for is the expense reports," he said, tossing his loafers into the corner of the room he was somewhat awkwardly sharing with the Old Man.

Reyes, boiling his own tea water in the room's small microwave, just snorted.

Lau shook her head. "Oh, you laugh now, but if our budget gets cut, you're going to miss that first-flush Darjeeling."

Chaz felt a near-proprietary satisfaction when Reyes tried to hide a grin.

Falkner and Hafidha arrived at the same time as the food. The kosher/vegetarian option was a runny spinach quiche, over which Reyes looked particularly apologetic.

"We should have tried that little cafe downtown," Lau said. Falkner shrugged and ate what was set before her, and some of Daphne's french fries too. Throwing dietary discipline to the wind, Chaz had pork chops and a burger, both of which were pretty good, though the ice cream wasn't anything to write home over.

"Frost thinks Basuto could be--could have been the gamma," Daphne said. Chaz ducked his chin and spidered his fingers across the shabby hotel bedspread toward her fries. She whacked his knuckles with her plastic fork. "When you get another S in front of your name, *maybe* you can get away with that."

"Game over?" Reyes said, frowning. "We've seen the host suicide before, but only in situations where there's immediate risk to others. Did Basuto have that?"

"There's her sister and niece," Falkner offered. "But no, forensics believes Basuto was alone when she died. Atypical behavior."

"Let's keep working on our live possibilities, then. If we're wrong, there's no harm done."

Because we can't afford to screw this up. Chaz was hungry enough and tired enough that he couldn't be sure the thought originated with him. He wanted to open the mirror just a hair, just to see if Reyes's frown was all for the case, if Falkner was as calm as she seemed, if Daphne thought Frost was right, if Lau was picking at her food because it was lousy or because grave-robbers were bad for her appetite. Hafidha was sucking linguine through puckered lips, scowling at her laptop screen. Her expression seemed to shift and twitch in the flickering glow of web pages changing like a flip book. If he used the mirror, would her inner display be as impossible for him to read as the outer one? Or would he get it, the way she got the candy-in-the-jar trick?

He wanted to open the mirror, but he didn't. A little insecurity was a small price to pay, to keep these five people.

Instead, he said, "That's a whole two names, then. Simon Talliwell and Peter..."

Before he could attempt it, Hafidha grabbed it away. "Kaczmareck. The internet knows and loves them both, in that internetty way that makes even very nice people look like potential felons."

Worth tried to cackle and swallow at the same time, and had to grab for her water glass, her eyes tearing.

Hafidha beamed at her before she continued. "Doctor Talliwell--and put "doctor" in quotes here--born in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Raised in a strict Pentecostal splinter church east of the snake handlers, which means home schooled and there's almost nothing we can get on his childhood without boots on the ground out there. However, he completed an undergrad and a Master's degree in psychology at the University of North Dakota. End of formal schooling. After that, he moved. A lot. Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina... You get the picture. His name's associated with narcotics and alcohol treatment groups all over the Midwest and the mid-Atlantic states. Except he's got no memberships in the professional organizations a psych guy specializing in treatment programs would want on his CV."

"Convictions for anything?" Lau asked.

"Three parking tickets and a speeding fine. He pays his bills, keeps up with his student loans, and has an average-good credit rating."

Worth shook her head. "If I didn't know you, I'd be a little scared right now."

Hafidha peered over the display of her laptop and through her lashes. "Your secrets are safe with me, Peaches."

"Any photos?" Falkner asked.

Hafidha wiggled her fingers toward the television that hogged most of the low dresser, and it lit up with what was obviously a driver's license photo, superimposed over the windows of data she was still scrolling through. "Oooh!" Lau squeaked. "I didn't know you could do that."

"The official monitor of the Commodore 64. Though I wouldn't know about that, being way too young."

Chaz sprawled back on his assigned bed to contemplate the image. Simon Talliwell was a white man in his late forties, who actually bore a passing resemblance to Solomon Todd in that there-are-only-twenty-basic-faces sort of way. He looked plumper than Todd, a little jowly and out of shape. "We need to get eyes on him," Chaz said. "Based on that photo, he's not our gamma." He raised both hands in a starfish-splat, the team's symbol for a conversational asterisk. "But it *is* a year or two old."

"Scam artist," Lau said, kicked back in the tweedy corner chair, which was somewhere between peanut butter and babyshit in color. She was eating three-bean salad in a sugary vinaigrette Chaz could smell across the room, and grimacing.

"What, a Pretender?" Chaz sat up a little. Pretending to be other people--in his heart of hearts--had always sounded like fun.

"Well, he's not a doctor, Doctor," Lau said. She grinned at him over her bowl of salad, setting his heart racing.

He looked away. Something in the patterns of streams of information scrolling up the TV monitor behind Talliwell's photo-- "Hafs," he said. "Narcotics and Alcohol Anonymous programs at the Living Word Of God Church. Baltimore, Maryland."

Hafidha's mouth dropped open, her braids moving across her shoulders as her chin lifted and her head turned. "By gum," she said. "You might be on to something. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Elementary, my dear Gates." He pointed. "He worked at programs in Washington, Philly, and Alexandria. Why skip Baltimore when he lived in Maryland? And that Living Word thing has been bugging me for going on two years now. It just kind of clicked." He made a helpless gesture with his hands. *Clicked*, sometimes, was what he did.

"One moment, please. I've been archiving every change to their website for the last two years. There's no Talliwell listed now, but--" She cocked her head, staring up at the ceiling, and information flashed across the monitor of her laptop and across the TV screen before her, faster now than Chaz could follow.

The Church of the Living Word was a Baltimore storefront operation that Hafidha had stumbled across back in 2007. The website *screamed* Anomaly. The church itself seemed totally on the up and up, or as up and up as those sorts of ecclesiastical enterprises ever were. The tax situation was a mess, in other words, and it was pretty certain the deacon was skimming and maybe committing various ethical violations with attractive female congregation members.

But there was no sign that anything *anomalous* was involved, and--even weirder--no sign that anything anomalous had been involved in setting up their addictively terrible website, which is what would have had to have happened for it to register on Hafidha's Fnord!cam, as she explained it. It had shown up on William Villette's activity at a rental car counter because he'd been using his power to influence the clerk while the clerk was entering data, but the mere fact of an anomaloid touching a computer wasn't enough to trigger her.

Otherwise, Chaz thought, Hafidha would find his daily emails really, really trippy.

"Bingo," Hafidha said. "Or rather, there's a Dr. Nathan Tolliver as head of the substance abuse program--a Dr. Tolliver who doesn't otherwise exist, and what are the odds?"

She shared her grin of triumph with Chaz, and he grinned right back. *Come on back to the team, Wabbit. You will always have a home here.*

"Checking back in with Peter Kaczmaniac for a minute," Hafidha said, "it gets better over there, also. They did not share an address and they were not blood relatives, but Arron Wakefield left Kaczmareck everything. Kaczmareck inherited a medium-good-size life insurance policy. Wakefield's cause of death is listed as liver failure, and a tox screen showed significant concentrations of cocaine in his body. However, no previous history of liver disease. As you know, long-term effects of gammahood include liver and kidney failure. Long-term effects of *cocaine*, on the other paw, include stroke, heart attack, brain damage--"

"Was he a drinker?" Lau leaned forward.

"Maybe not so much, based on blog entries and so on. And man, this guy's MySpace page, it's a symphony of brain pain. However, it occurred to me that there are any number of poisons that can cause slow liver failure, and some of them are available as inexpensive over-the-counter medications, which if Wakefield didn't know he'd ODed, could have cleared his system long before the tox screen--"

"You think Kaczmareck poisoned Wakefield with *Tylenol*?" Falkner blinked. It was kind of nice to know that something could unsettle her.

"I think it's a big maybe. A quarter million dollars pays for a few months of a coke habit, anyway."

"I sense," said Chaz, "a Pattern. Lovers?"

Reyes shrugged. "We'll find out tomorrow."

Chaz rubbed his hands together. "How do we like Kaczmareck for a blackmailer? If he's going to kill his friend or boyfriend for an insurance policy, he wouldn't stick at using what he learned in an NA meeting to pressure people for money. Or they could *all* be being blackmailed by a third party we haven't identified yet. Maybe Basuto's uncle and sister didn't know everything she got up to. That could explain why Basuto killed herself. Cramer might be vulnerable to allegations of murdering her child. Kaczmareck might be equally vulnerable regarding Wakefield. And Talliwell" --he glanced at Lau-- "*'Well, you're no doctor, Doctor. And I can make sure everybody in this town knows.'* "

"Basis for speculation?" Reyes asked.

"They all had something to hide," Chaz replied. "Plus Basuto's suicide."

Reyes looked at him, really looked, brows drawing together until Chaz cleared his throat and glanced down. Then Reyes nodded, as if there had been a long conversation in that awkwardness, and rubbed his hands together.

"There's not a ticking clock on this one," Reyes said. "More of a ticking calendar. If Basuto does represent the start of a pattern of escalation--which, I admit, feels satisfying to me--and if this *is* an anomalous case, and if she *wasn't* the gamma, there's no sign our UNSUB is decompensating. We can afford to be meticulous, to dot all the Is and cross the Qs. And we really need to talk to Sandy Cramer, Peter Kaczmareck--and Simon Talliwell. Pretender, scam artist, or...something else, it looks as if he has a connection to Basuto, a possible link to Kaczmareck who's linked to Basuto and also to another one of our disturbed corpses, and an apparent affiliation with past anomalous activity."

"So, what?" asked Lau, leaning forward.

Reyes steepled his hands. "So tomorrow, we crash some NA meetings."

"Steal," Daphne said. "*Steal* an NA meeting. And anyway, it sounds better when Timothy Hutton says it."

"I could sneak into one of the meetings," Chaz said. "Stand in the back. Eavesdrop a little."

It felt weird, still, to offer openly. And he was secretly relieved when Reyes looked at him, chewing his lower lip, and said, "I'm not sending you in without backup like that."

*

Long about the time Chaz started mincing up on the idea of using his superpowers on behalf of the team, Lau gave up picking at the limp beans of her salad and stood up to go steal one of his remaining onion rings. He gave her a dark look, but it wasn't very convincing.

She stuck out her tongue and he grinned his shy grin. She thought about Madalyn Basuto's inappropriate taste in men. She thought about her own. If she had any damned sense, she'd take Chaz up on it, but then, if she had any

sense, she'd have stuck with Pete. *The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing of.*

Richard had been a lost cause as soon as she took a hard look at her life and realized that there was no military future for her, either in the Air Force or as an Air Force wife.

Sometimes, she thought Dana was the only person from her childhood who had forgiven her for leaving the tribe.

"I got us a breakfast meeting with Sandy Cramer," Reyes said, getting up to make himself another cup of tea. "Tabatha's mother. Losing a kid's tough--"

"Losing anyone's tough," Hafidha interrupted. When the team, as one, winced, Hafidha held up both hands in a placating gesture. "Just being pedantic. Don't mind me."

There was an almost-smile curling at the edge of her mouth. Lau didn't like it; it felt like Hafidha had been poking them to see if they'd react. Which was normal enough--sometimes people wore grief like a flag, and if they couldn't find ways to ask for attention and support, they provoked to get it. But it still bothered and worried her.

Would it worry her if Falkner hadn't asked about Hafidha, back in DC? Was she hypersensitive because of that? *Agggggh. Stupid, stupid profiler brain.*

Reyes tilted his head, trying to read Hafidha. She met his gaze and nodded, and whether it satisfied him or not--well, cold-reading Stephen Reyes was a lifetime learning project. He said, "Worth, Villette, I'd like you both to come. Lau, if there is any way you can get the DNA results on the tissue and the gum, that would be great. Sit on them. If those are Sandy Cramer's tears or saliva, I want to be able to call her on it tomorrow morning."

Lau said, "I'm Wonder Woman, not The Flash. DNA will still take... well, a while. Probably at least a week, even if I lean on people. And I will be leaning on people. What about Peter Kaczmareck?"

"He teaches Sunday school at First United Methodist," Hafidha said. "I bet they don't know about his DUIs and drug convictions."

"Madalyn Basuto also taught Sunday school at First United Methodist, didn't she?" asked Reyes. Falkner nodded, and Lau took note: another link.

Addiction, recovery, dirty little secrets. Sunday school. Murder made for strange juxtapositions.

"Frost says our gamma might already be dead," Worth reminded the room. "If we're just the trauma cleanup team this time?"

"We thank our stars and do a damned fine job scrubbing and repainting," Reyes said.

"She wasn't left-handed." Falkner dismissed her own words with a wave of her hand even as she enunciated them. *Not conclusive.*

Worth said, "Based on her history--and this is speculation--if she was sexually abused in the treatment program, that could be a crack."

"What if she wasn't a gamma?" Hafidha blurted. "What if she was a beta?"

"We only know of two betas and I'm looking at both of them." Lau bit her lip, startled by the intensity of her own outburst. *Reaction formation*, but what the hell was she reacting to? She pressed her forehead, wincing at the pressure of déjà vu, and sat down on the edge of Chaz's bed beside the wreckage of his dinner. "Sorry. Sorry. Headache."

Chaz pushed the tray out of her way and nudged her shoulder "And we're not even sure about them." She glanced at him sharply, but he smiled when he said it. Hafidha didn't.

Instead, Hafidha's hands were pinwheeling in excitement. "If we exist, it stands to reason there are more. What about a scenario where someone is taking betas and turning them into gammas?" Hafidha looked around the room. "There must be lots of people like me who are just better at laying low. So what if Talliwell has been traveling around, using his programs to meet people who have been stressed and traumatized, picking out the likely ones--"

Falkner narrowed her eyes. "You're saying you think there's more than one host? Based on the tissue and the gum?"

"Based on Tameka and Carrie-Ann. Based on Chaz and me." Hafidha gestured back and forth between them. "Based on Hope Mitchell and her mysterious partner and possible murderer." She looked around the room, took a deep breath, and looked right at Lau when she said three words

everybody in the WTF hated. "Evolving anomaly model. There's evidence in *this* case to support it."

"What about the grotesque posing of the bodies?" Falkner asked. "Isn't that intention to harm?"

Hafidha ducked her head, awarding Falkner the point, but said, "It could also be the result of experimentation. I'm not sure we have enough to go on to profile intent, there, yet."

"Based on how long it takes to dig up a body," Chaz said, "Hafidha's right. Even without a vault, coffins are buried at least six feet deep and most of them--Tabatha's notwithstanding--are at least six feet long. They might not all be gammas--remember Susannah Greenwood and Morgan Crierwy?--but unless his manifestation is grave-digging, there's probably more than one person involved."

"God gave him a gift," Lau intoned, desperately needing to break the tension. "He shovels well. He shovels *very* well."

It got a laugh, anyway. And then Reyes stepped into the slightly less-tense silence that followed, calm and in control with the findings and the summary.

"Hafidha is right. Gamma is a questionable diagnosis at this time," Reyes said. "And we have to consider the possibility that we're looking at the third team in the space of half a year. If Madalyn Basuto was an-- a jammer, she might as easily have been a beta. There's no evidence of intention to harm anyone. And she might have had a partner or partners--or she might have been the victim of another individual or team. Worth, Villette, I want you to travel out to the rehab center tomorrow afternoon, after we interview Cramer, and see if you can pry anything out of them about Basuto's stay."

Daphne nodded. "There goes the weekend."

*

Long after she should have been in bed, nursing her aching temples, Lau sat up in her t-shirt and panda-and-star pajama bottoms and stared at her cell phone, willing it to ring. She'd called in several favors to get the lab to promise her an inhumanly fast turnaround on the results, but promises sometimes got buried under paperwork. Or mere human frailty.

Daphne could probably tell her exactly how long the testing itself would take, but right now Nikki felt a little like Han Solo. *Never tell me the odds*. If what she was asking for was actually physically impossible, she just didn't want to know.

A familiar knock sounded on her door, and she got up to check the peephole and open up.

Hafidha stood there, an armful of snacks cradled to her chest with one hand and a bottle of root beer dangling from the other. She was wearing a deep blue satin dressing gown with golden lapels. Gorgeous. And typical. What was *atypical* was the complete absence of any electronic devices. She could probably just pick up a signal from Lau's Blackberry if she decided she needed one.

"You look dressed up for a better quality of sleepover than you're likely to find in these parts."

Hafidha walked past her to dump her bounty on the bed. "Worth's on the phone with her sweetie, Chaz is in with Dad, and anyway one of them is snoring so loudly I can hear him through the door, and I knew you'd still be up. Where's Mom?"

"Went down to the lobby to talk to her family, I think."

Hafidha's eyes looked a little glassy. Lau pushed a pile of case jackets off the second chair--they made a satisfying papery splat against the carpet--and gestured Hafidha into it.

"I'm thinking of calling the lab to give them a little nudge."

"How many calls will this make?" Hafidha flopped into the chair. "Sorry. It's UTZ. It's what they had at the convenience store."

Lau took off-brand cheese puffs and ripped them open. "Eleventy." She smiled. "Thanks for coming over with these."

Hafidha swigged root beer like Corona and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. "Jean de la Bruyere. 17th century French moralist. 'All of our unhappiness comes from our inability to be alone.'"

Lau put one of the puffs on her tongue and crushed it against the roof of her mouth, feeling it dissolve into a sharp, greasy glob. "Jayzus. What would he

think of the World Wide Web? No, don't answer that. War? Murder? Substance abuse? Compulsive gambling? I'm having trouble coming up with a counterexample." If Hafidha wanted to discuss philosophy, Lau would damned well help her do it. At least she was talking.

"I think it would be easier to be alone if we didn't have to be alone with ourselves."

Lau opened her mouth to ask her to explain, but her phone buzzed. She reached for it and then stopped when she saw the number. Justin, a guy she'd met a week back. A clean-cut securities trader, but the way his eyes lit up when he talked about his weekend hunting (read: drinking) trips stirred her interest. She was smart enough not to date him; she should have been smart enough not to give him her phone number.

Your family would not approve of your taste in men, Nikki.

Well, duh. That was why she had it.

"Are you going to get that?" Hafidha asked.

"Nope." Lau hit END and sent it straight to voicemail. "Being alone is so not my problem. Being with somebody else, I suck at." She wanted Hafs to open up, and sometimes talking about yourself was an invitation. She gritted her teeth and rolled her eyes. "Bad boy disease."

"Pistol Pete is the farthest thing from a bad boy--"

"*Exactly*," Lau said, and grinned at her.

Hafidha winced. "Ouch. Have you tried hypnotherapy?"

"I was thinking of wearing a shock collar, honestly." Lau scrolled down the phone history and jabbed her thumb on the green button when she got to the entry for the lab.

The lab technician spent a lot of time explaining to her how they usually didn't do anything this quickly. Not for anyone. Not under any circumstances. Nikki listened patiently. Listening to people made them helpful. When she'd been appropriately chastened, he read her the results. She thanked him and hung up the phone. *Score another one for the miracle worker.*

"Everything okay?" Hafidha asked, day-glo orange cheez powder smeared across her soft, frowning, brown cheek.

"There's a new quick polymerase chain reaction process. This is just a preliminary, but the lab has managed to isolate several VNTRs from the gum and the tissues," Lau said. "They're running it through CODIS and the NDIS. Of course, the odds of our perp having DNA on file are, well, negligible."

"I can expedite the indexing," Hafidha said. "And I'll ask Daphsy to see if she can pick up a DNA sample from Tabatha Cramer's mother tomorrow. Are you prepared to lean on Kaczmareck? If we get a profile on him and on Cramer we won't need CODIS to pull a match--we can just hand the printouts to the Platypus and he can tell us if they're compatible. Better than a mean old FBI tech any day."

Lau smiled. There was something kind of cozy about your friends using their superpowers more or less like a flatbed scanner. "I'll bring my trusty cheek swabs. Sometimes the threat of a DNA test is enough to get people talking. They watch *CSI*. They don't know it's not magic."

"Magic," Hafidha said, She extended one regal hand for the cheez doodles. "I could use me some of that."

*

You could have been a better person. You used to be one, you're pretty sure. Hard to tell, when so much is hazy or just plain missing.

You don't like to notice the missing bits. It makes you feel like you're stuck on a midway ride, upside down and swinging, and pretty soon you won't be able to hang on.

But you remember the baseball trophies, little gilded batters leaning into their swing, and being able to think, That's what I look like. *It felt good. And the athletic scholarship, that did, too.*

It was vodka back then, so no one would smell it on your breath. Everybody did it. Except not everybody wrapped a car around a telephone pole on graduation night. The broken leg, the lost scholarship, the shit jobs: you were in hell. Right where you deserved to be. Pride goeth before crumpled metal and broken glass and nothing will ever feel good again.

You hadn't seen that it wasn't all you, you, you. Coach talked about "team" and you heard "star," and thought you could shine enough to read by. You're smarter now. By yourself you're a drunk, a crackhead, a failure, a mistake. But you're not by yourself anymore. You can feel the mighty hosts, hear the strong voices around and inside you. Lift up your voice with theirs. Now you know what shining is. You're a star among a million stars, one bright speck in Heaven's glory.

Your lungs swell to take in the joy.

Act IV

Sunday morning Reyes loaded Worth and Villette into the rental Subaru to interview Sandy Cramer, feeling absurdly like a soccer dad. Before pulling out, he made one last check-in with Falkner, who was heading off with Lau and Hafidha to locate Peter Kaczmareck at his weekend job as a Sunday school teacher. Three was big for an interview party, small for a gamma hunt, and ever since Hope Mitchell, Reyes had been unable to shake the bladed apprehension that heralded every potential encounter with a gamma.

"Careful," he said to Falkner unnecessarily, so she would smile and say, "Careful," unnecessarily back to him. He patted the photo of a red-haired, blue-eyed, slender young woman in his breast pocket and winked at her. "You know I always do exactly what you tell me."

She laughed, which was good, and got into her car.

Let's split up, he thought, as her rented Mazda--piloted by Lau--glided out of the hotel parking lot. *We can be spread over more ground that way.*

Fifteen minutes later, Reyes and his team sat down in a vinyl-booths-and-sun-shaped-sign kind of coffeeshop, Villette and Reyes opposite and Worth beside a woman who looked like a faded image of her photograph. Sandy Cramer was painfully thin and her hands shook. Like a gamma, sure, but she also looked like an addict. One of her front teeth had blackened with rot and dirt caked the underside of her fingernails.

Madalyn Basuto, emaciated. Sandra Cramer, emaciated. Was either one a gamma?

Reyes didn't think so. Cape Cod and Susannah Greenwood were not so very long ago.

"Thanks for meeting with us," Worth said.

"My house is really messy," Sandy said, fretting her fingers together. She gulped. "I don't like letting people see it. I know I should clean up, but sometimes I just can't figure out where everything goes."

Reyes made himself conscious of his stillness, conscious of the receptivity of his body language and expression. Just the awareness helped, he found--if you *thought* of yourself as listening, people *perceived* you as listening, and they made the effort to speak.

"Can I get you a coffee? Tea? I'm going up anyway," Chaz said.

Sandy Cramer smiled at him, hesitant and pleased. She wasn't much older than Villette, and quite possibly even less used to human kindness. "Thank you. I'll take whatever. Whatever you're having."

Villette rose, went to the counter and ordered coffee and pastries for the table--and tea for Reyes, Lipton for his sins--while the others watched him. The shop was nearly empty, like everything else in this town, and Villette returned shortly, balancing a tray. The doughnuts and muffins looked a little on the stale side, but Sandy ate three anyway, dipping each bite carefully in her coffee. Meth addicts notoriously loved sugar; so did gammas.

Reyes waited until she slowed down and said, "We're investigating the disturbance of Tabatha's grave. This must be very hard for you."

Sandy nodded. "You would think it'd get easier but it doesn't. I know my baby forgives me and that makes things easier, but the pain never really goes away. If you'd ever lost someone--a family member--you'd understand."

Neither Villette nor Worth batted an eye, leaving Reyes silently, achingly proud of their professionalism. He repaid them the best way he could, by not wasting their strength but instead using it as they had intended--keeping her talking, and not allowing himself to frown over the phrase *I know my baby forgives me*. "I lost my father, but that's not like losing a child."

"Were you at the site?" Worth asked. "Did the police bring you up to identify the grave?"

Sandy shook her head, but her teeth pressed into her lower lip, and she glanced up, over Reyes' head. "I don't think I could have stood to see that."

"So you didn't come to your daughter's grave at any time after her remains were disturbed?" Worth asked.

"No," she said. "Absolutely not."

Worth was earning her raise today. Reyes leaned forward, elbows on the table, ignoring the pinch of his ribs that was more a habit than a real reminder of injury now. "We found some tissues at the site, Ms. Cramer, and we've isolated DNA evidence from them. You can provide us with a sample now for comparison, or we can get a court order. In any case, we're confident that they will confirm your presence at the gravesite."

She shook her head again, more violently. Her hands clenched on her empty coffee mug, and she rocked against the booth back. Worth turned slightly to face her. "I must have come there before. I visit her grave. I'm her mother."

This is the garden path, Reyes thought. *Walk down it.* "Do you know a man named Peter Kaczmareck? He's the Sunday School teacher at First United Methodist."

Cramer's mouth pressed thin and grim. Her fingertips whitened on the mug.

"He also attends your support group, doesn't he?"

"That's private," she said. "That's confidential."

"Okay," Chaz said, "but tell me what's the most difficult part of recovery?"

"The hardest one for me was confronting people I've wronged," she said. "But I'm just past the twelfth step."

"And what comes after that?" Chaz asked. The booth was so quiet that Reyes could hear all of them breathing.

"All the other steps," she said. "All the steps that take you up to heaven."

The silence stretched. Reyes sat back and folded his arms.

"I'm afraid there was dirt inside the tissue," said Reyes. "And a microscopic forensic analysis lets us state confidently that the soil was from inside the grave. That's sufficient for me to obtain a warrant for your arrest, Ms.

Cramer. But I don't want to arrest you. I believe you're as much a victim in this as Tabatha."

When her pupils contracted, he knew he had her. He wished he wasn't quite so happy about it, but the brain took its endorphins where it could find them. Now, to offer her the door out, and the helping hand to get there. He looked at Villette, but Villette was already on it.

"Ms. Cramer," he said. "I don't think you killed anybody. I think somebody pressured you into activities that seemed more reasonable at the time than they really were. And that is the person we are interested in finding."

He leaned forward, intent and helpful, just as Reyes' phone vibrated in its holster opposite his gun. Unlike so many of his team, he didn't affect tailored ringtones, and Hafidha respected--or pretended to respect--him enough to leave the default unhacked.

He glanced at the readout and stood. "Excuse me. I have to take this."

"Can I go now?" Sandy asked, in the voice of a little girl called to the principal's office.

No one, Reyes understood. No one had ever given her the tools that would have placed her in a position of power in her own life. No one had ever given her the chance to be anybody except a victim. She had been doomed from the first, and whatever experience or genetics might have given her the agency to save herself, to save her daughter--it had never materialized.

It was long gone and too late now.

He answered the phone because FBI agents don't cry.

"I'm afraid not," said Worth. "We can hold you for questioning for up to seventy-two hours. You'll be returning to the Sheriff's office with us."

Reyes put the phone to his ear and turned away so he could hear what Falkner was saying. She was out of breath. Her voice sounded like it was coming from a long way away. "Stephen, ah--I. This is bad. What you said about him not decompensating?"

His first name was a damned bad sign. So was her level of upset, the strain in her voice shining through the static. He felt himself go cold all though his belly, legs abruptly long and spindly and unbalanced, his chest knotting

around anxiety instead of expanding to take in air. "Special Agent, I can barely hear you."

Another crackle. "--Kids, a whole classroom of them."

"Repeat, please."

Perhaps she'd stepped outside of a structure, because her voice suddenly and unwelcomely came clear. "Another--Reyes, Kaczmareck. He's dead, And his entire Sunday school class at First United Methodist. All of them. Just like Madalyn..."

Esther Falkner sobbed, a sound that Stephen Reyes would have prayed to God he never heard again in this lifetime, if he were still a praying man. He wondered how many of the dead children were the same age as Falkner's girls.

"Secure the scene," he said, because right this second, Falkner the consummate leader needed a voice of leadership, and that was something he could give her. "We've got Cramer. She's safe for now. We're on our way."

He turned back to the table. Worth was already on her feet and pulling Cramer up with her, Villette at the counter settling the bill. When Worth caught his eye, turning, he just nodded. The kind of nod that was worse than a headshake, and he saw her take it like a punch in the gut.

"Ms. Cramer," he said. "For your own protection, I am afraid you must accompany us to the Sheriff's office. Something's come up, and we will have to continue this conversation in a few hours."

"I want my lawyer," she said.

*

The basement of First United Methodist smelled like mildew and burnt coffee and freshly spilled blood. Three elderly volunteers and the pastor stood with cops in the coatroom beyond a narrow hallway; one of the women was keening horribly, her voice still rising, and an emergency services worker, uniform dark with a spreading, sticky stain, was attempting to comfort or possibly sedate her. Hafidha hung her ID around her neck, slipped the booties on her feet, and walked past into the doorway of the big room.

The walls were covered in fake wood paneling and kids' art. Crayon portraits of glitter-glue angels, of Adam and Eve holding up apples, and of what Hafidha guessed were locusts were now all spattered red.

Children still slumped at the tables, still stared with empty eyes at a free-standing chalkboard. All of their necks were sliced open, their shirts stiff with drying gore.

"I heard singing," one of the elderly women was saying from down the hallway, out of sight. Thin walls. "A man was singing, but it sounded like there were other voices too. And then just screaming. The door was locked and we tried to break it down. Finally the janitor opened it and..."

At the front of the class, Peter Kaczmareck lay on the blood-saturated carpet. He was a bone-thin man with a mild expression, even in death, that was utterly at odds with the surroundings. To all appearances, he had cut his own throat so deeply that his head was nearly severed from his neck. That took a lot of strength. The kind of strength normal people with his build just didn't have, unless they were deep in the throes of the sort of adrenaline reaction that left you with torn muscle fibers and wrenched tendons... if you lived.

On the board above him, someone had written: GOD SPEAKS EAR TO EAR. YOU DO NOT NEED A PRIEST TO SPEAK FOR YOU. YOU ARE NOT THE PUPPET OF THE MEN WHO WOULD BLAME.

And then below it: OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD.

The chalk had skipped in the blood.

Hafidha tried to imagine how something like this could have happened. She tried to imagine how she'd failed in her calling to the extent that she had *let* it happen. There just hadn't been enough warning. It was too big, too deep, too wide to grow out of one funky death and a bunch of busted-up coffins.

This just wasn't the way the process *worked*.

She recognized the phrasing from the website of the Church of the Living Word. He'd been out here for years. *Years*. And she had missed him.

The whole world smelled like blood.

"Hafidha?" Reyes asked from behind her. It was that trained, mellow, measured voice, so reasonable, so full of alternatives and plans of attack, that had given her a reason to keep fighting when he first found her. Now it sounded as flat as the dull thumps of her heart. "You know you can't go in there before forensics."

For a moment, she looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Right. Her team. She'd forgotten about them.

"I know that," she said softly.

"I know you know that," Reyes said. "So how about you come on out of there and we try and figure this thing out? We've got to get the people upstairs."

Falkner was in the hallway, with Lau, talking to the pastor. Worth and Chaz were nowhere in sight; perhaps they'd been left at the police station with the other gamma, or other beta, or other victim. Whatever she turned out to be. Slowly the elderly women were being helped away from the crime scene. The one who had been keening had stopped. Another one was weeping now in silent gasps, tears wetting her face.

"Could this be the thing that Madalyn refused to do?" Reyes asked quietly, as though he was weighing the idea.

She could have said *So you don't think this was the gamma? So you don't think this is a team of gammas?* Hafidha looked back into the room. "He locked them in with him. Closed the windows. Like a-- god, like a fox in a henhouse. They had nowhere to go, and when he caught one, he killed--" -- *it.* Because how you could think of those as people, and do what he had done? "Then he moved on to the next. He put them back in the chairs when he was done."

Reyes's hand brushed her elbow. "The scene has been affected by EMS activity." *Checking to see if any of the victims were still alive*. She was glad he didn't say *compromised*.

She swallowed, and regretted it. "But why the suicide?"

"The host is careful," Reyes said. A muscle in his jaw jumped, like he was talking around clenched teeth.

It got out, this time. "You don't think Peter Kaczmareck was the host?" Hafidha asked.

She couldn't stop looking at the way the blood was matting in the thin brown hair of a girl with pigtails, the way their eyes had not yet clouded though their cheeks paled in death. *If only there were the buzz of a fly, this would be perfect*. But the church was air-conditioned, and no flies had yet found their way in.

Surely this should make me cry, she thought. *Surely this should touch me*.

But inside of her was as dry as dust.

She looked up at the blackboard again and saw the letter cards hanging over it. Ringed the top of the classroom, each letter shown in capital and lower case. A is for Apple. B is for Bodybag. C for Catastrophe.

"P is for Puppet," Reyes said, and touched her lightly on the arm. "Come on. Let's go talk to Chaz about Sandra Cramer."

*

Chaz sat behind the one-way glass in the observation area of one of the two interview rooms in the Hancock County Sheriff's Office, sipping coffee with cream and sugar and listening to his stomach rumble. It was past lunch time, but he was too nauseated to think about eating. Given what Lau had called in about the crime scene, for once he didn't feel left out to be staying behind. And he had something important to do here.

He was watching Sandy Cramer wait for her lawyer.

He wouldn't have expected her to wait well--addicts in early recovery were not renowned for their Zen--but she surprised him. She sat in the floor-bolted chair behind the floor-bolted table, her unmanacled hands resting in her lap, a plastic cup of water by her elbow.

She had closed her eyes, and she was humming.

Fortunately for the WTF, Sunday afternoon in Yardston, Ohio was not peak hour for quickly obtaining a public defense attorney, which meant that Chaz had time to stare. And Sandra had time to sing, a strangely compelling little tune. If it had words, he couldn't quite make them out--or maybe they disappeared as soon as they were sung. It was hard not to sing along with her. Before Texas, he might have found himself humming under his breath.

Before Texas, he might not have realized that the urge to join in was anything but natural.

"So if you're not a gamma," he said under his breath, having shaken the song out of his head one more time, "what are you?"

When his Adorable Overhyped Phone played the first notes of the theme from "Shaft," he answered it immediately. "She's still breathing, boss. And singing."

"Puppets," Reyes said in his ear, sounding like a man twenty years older. "They're puppets. Don't let anybody else listen to the music. And you--"

"Be careful?"

The silence on the other end of the phone was one tired, tired smile.

The door of the observation booth opened and Worth slipped through the crack, light brown hair ponytailed and frown lines at the corners of her eyes. Frantically, with his free hand, Chaz pointed to her and then stuck a finger in his ear.

Her head tilted, expression incredulous.

He opened the right hand, jerking it away from his body. *What? Do it!*

She was his partner. She took a deep sigh and dug into her pocket, coming up with a pair of custom earplugs in a clear plastic case--for range shooting and hotel sleeping. Indispensable.

"I love you," he mouthed, and she flipped him the finger, but she put the earplugs in.

Reyes cleared his throat. "You still there?"

"Yeah," Chaz said. He shifted the phone to his other ear. "I was just warning Daphne about the siren. There's no guarantee I'm immune to this thing, you know."

"Try not to listen. Look, the host is likely to be Talliwell--"

Chaz felt the song nudging at him, subvocalizing. He swallowed it down. "What about Cramer?"

"I think Talliwell's feeding off and manipulating her and the others. But he's in the wind. We've sent uniforms around to his house, the other support

group locations. Nothing."

"Fuck," Chaz said, forgetting for a moment that he was dropping the F-bomb on his boss. "Were there any survivors at the church?"

"No," Reyes said. "Wait, Hafidha is here. She wants to say something. You're on speaker."

"Hi, Hafs. What you got for me?"

"Mythology," she said. On his end of the conversation, Daphne walked over, hunkered down, and pulled an earplug out. She cocked her ear to the phone, and Chaz responded by turning off the sound feed from the interview room, which was what he should have done in the first place, and turning on the phone speaker.

"Daphne is here. Cult leader as a gamma?" asked Chaz. "Addiction, God, what have we got?"

"Christianity," said Hafs. "He grew up in a splinter church. Want to bet there was speaking in tongues? God possessing the faithful? You *know* there was singing. Add that to a twelve-step program--"

"I'm missing something," Chaz said. "If you could see me, I would be making the international symbol for context."

"The twelve step credo," Hafidha said. "It's supposed to be admitting one's own powerlessness, believing a power outside oneself like God can restore you, turning over your life to that power, making a moral inventory, telling God and someone else the wrongs you've done, asking God to remove all those defects of character, asking God to get rid of shortcomings, make a list of people you've wronged, make amends to those people, make direct amends where possible, continued personal inventory where possible, praying for more guidance from God, and then practicing and carrying on the message. It's all about surrender."

Chaz heard Reyes's intake of breath all the way down the phone line.

"Seventeen steps that take you all the way to heaven," Reyes said. "So, more steps. Singing. Speaking in tongues. Surrendering yourself to the will of God--as personified by Talliwell. Being *possessed*."

Chaz closed his eyes, the way he had in Texas. He blew air out through his nose, and tried not to feel gentle fingers moving in his hair. *I am a poor wayfaring stranger--* "Singing is a way to encourage feelings of loyalty," he said. "It can also create camaraderie without the risk of talking."

Worth set her clipboard on the desk, tracing a line of her own writing absently. "I managed a phone interview with the pastor of one of the churches where they meet. He mentioned the singing. Like a professional chorus, he said. Not like a bunch of addicts who meet a couple of times a week."

That thought shivered up Chaz's spine.

"Killing children is one of our most profound societal taboos," Reyes said. "This murder was designed to horrify, to emotionally maim. To destroy. Not just individuals. The entire community, which is already socially fragile."

"Gamma," Hafidha said like a prayer. "If it's Talliwell, he went from lurking evil to flowering canker in like Maserati time. So what's the trigger?"

Worth swallowed loud enough that Chaz could hear it.

"We are," she said. "Come on, what are the odds that this guy goes postal as soon as we get here? We were lured out here. This is for us."

"I hate you," Chaz sighed.

She flashed him a brilliant, bitter smile.

"*Open your eyes to the suffering of the world,*" said Reyes. "I think Daphne is right. Maybe it's us, maybe it's not us, but he's been setting this up for years. He's an evangelist. He wants us to see what the anomaly sees. All that suffering. And he puts his disciples through a certain amount of suffering too--"

"Confronting the people who've been wronged," Chaz said. His fingers hurt; he realized he was squeezing his AOP like a rescue rope. Nausea was definitely winning out over hunger now. "Sandy said that was the worst part. And she said she knew her daughter forgave her. What if she knew her daughter forgave her because she actually *saw* the corpse of her daughter tell her so?"

"Puppetmaster," Reyes said. "The manipulated corpses, the alien hands."

Chaz saw Daphne raise her hand to her throat, and with an empathetic flinch that was only half the mirror, knew what she was remembering. Their first case together, the press of one's own tongue into the throat--

"Chazzie," Hafidha said. "You have got to get it out of Sandy lady *where* her bossman is hiding. If she's singing and he's in her head, you should be able to interrogate him *through* her, right? This guy's the Puppetmaster; he thinks he's too smart to beat. And he's been baiting us since 2007. Do you think there's any chance that I got that flyer from the Living Word of God by *coincidence?*"

"That's that thing we don't believe in again," Daphne said.

"Chaz can't interview her," Reyes said. "She lawyered up."

Hafidha said, "Then Talliwell's going to be in Peru or something by tomorrow."

Chaz turned his head and stared as if he could see across town to the church and its freight of murdered children. Even with the walls between them, he knew the direction. "Oh, I can interview her all right," Chaz said. "I just can't ask her any questions."

Daphne turned toward him, saw his expression and put her hand on his arm. It was too late, though. He was already pushing past her, plucking the clipboard out of her hand as he went, out into the hall and around the corner to the locked door to the interview room.

The clipboard clutched in his hand, a pen in the other, Chaz took a breath and stepped inside.

Sandy Cramer lifted her head, still humming, her eyes faded blue. "Mister Villette," she said. "You're one of us, you know. You're not alone."

She had a child's big eyes in a starveling face, and right now they were full of gamine honesty. He waited, arms folded around the clipboard, to see what she would say.

"Haven't you ever just wanted an easy answer? Wanted something to take the pain away?"

Chaz flinched. *Leaning back against William Villette's shoulder, thinking how easy, how safe and comfortable, it would be to give in, to be owned...*

Cramer's stare was hungry, as if somehow she could see the milky remains of hospital opiates waiting to blossom inside him. She might be three years older than Addy Villette had been, when his mother had kicked out her life on a bathroom floor. Addiction runs in families. He thought instead of dead kids and the dead look Hafidha gave him when he asked her if she was all right.

He sat down across from her, the pen creaking in his hands, and let the mirror slide slowly open. Despite his caution, she came into him like a whirlwind. Like a voice speaking out of a fire. She came into him, and she blew him open.

He could feel Sandy under there, feel her confusion and addiction and the helpless clench of her fingers as someone she had never seen before and would never see again lifted Tabatha out of her arms. He felt the sting of smoke and tasted the blessed relief. He would have recoiled from it--too raw, too close--but something else clutched at him, sank ragged claws, drew him close and whispered something like sweet seduction against his skin.

What spilled out of his mouth in her voice was different, new. *Organized.*

People think of addicts as weak, just because they have suffered and seen. Addicts are the chosen, born unable to look away from the world in all its misery. No poor human can stand looking into the face of God. Is it any wonder that we try to blur the glass? Is it any wonder that we would pass out in bars, in ditches, in the backs of cars? Is it any wonder that we would do anything for a piece of the oblivion the rest of you have every day?

You do not need a priest for God to hear you. You only need to be broken at the heart.

God breaks us because he loves us.

God breaks us so we can let him in.

My parents were addicts and my parents' parents were addicts. Maybe in the old days we would have been prophets.

Damage opens the door. Damage lets in the ability to see.

We are the damaged. We are the chosen. We will show you the steps.

Climb with us and sing.

It *hurt*. Not staying, getting loose. Getting off the barbs of those loving, caressing claws. He jerked himself together. Folded himself closed. staggered back from the table, scraping his thighs and calves on the chair. Daphne must have come in after him, because she was there, holding his arm, supporting him.

It's mommy's medicine, cowboy. It's so mommy can do her job. That's all.

"Hey," she asked him, as he lurched upright. "You okay in there?"

Sandy Cramer lifted her gaze. She smiled, leaning forward across the table, her hands spread flat on it now. "Oh, sweetheart," she said. "You really understand. You're like *us*. You *understand*."

Chaz yanked his gaze away, shuddering. He whispered, just for Daphs, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; for now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known."

"That's that Christian book thing." She was trying to lighten the moment. It wasn't working.

"1 Corinthians 13:12." Chaz licked suddenly dry lips. "She's not alone. He's in there with her. I know where he is, though. I know where he is."

Sandy smiled up at him. "You brought me what I asked for." She slid a hand forward as if reaching out to him, but at the last moment it slapped down. Too late, he understood what she was after.

The clipboard tore apart in her hands, spring snapping, bloodying her fingers. It was only a little blood.

But not for long.

Chaz lunged, Daphne right behind him. He threw himself across the table, got his hands on Sandy's wrist. Pulled.

Too late. Arterial blood, red as currant jelly, gouted. Daphne shoved him aside, scrambling through swamps of sticky blood across the table to follow Sandy down while Chaz dove for the panic button by the door.

"EMS," she yelled, crimson pulsing between her fingers. "Get me a fucking bus right now!"

Act V

With Falkner behind the wheel and the party lights running, it wouldn't take long to get from one side of Yardston to the other. From one church to the other. One mass murder scene to...an arrest. They would be in time. An apprehension.

Lau had never noticed that double meaning before. She wished she hadn't now.

Reyes, in the front passenger seat, was on his cell to the state police, making sure they had roadblocks in place. If Talliwell tried to bolt, that might slow him down. Hafidha, beside Lau in the back seat, gripped the grab bar over her door; that was the only sign she noticed their breakneck pace. She gazed forward out the windshield, over Reyes's shoulder, serene, concentrating, as if she was waiting for something to appear on the horizon. One of her braids had worked loose from its scrunchie, and swung across her face as Falkner cornered at something like the limit of rubber's ability to stick to asphalt.

This was the hardest part: where you threw everything you had at a gamma and prayed you'd all make it out alive. She still remembered Frank Scott's inhuman grip in the San Diego copshop, when they'd lured him out of hiding. Two days later, she'd realized the ache in her biceps, the band of purple bruise, were from his fingers. No one was around to hear her swallow a sob, or watch her scrub her arm with hot water and soap until the skin stung. They'd got him. It had taken most of the team and a local police division, but Scott had gone out in the proverbial hail of gunfire, some of it Lau's.

But what if it wasn't just Talliwell? Was Peter Kaczmareck just a conduit for the puppeteer, or had he been a gamma himself? If Sandy Cramer was a gamma, she didn't seem very good at it--but Chaz, calling in as he and Worth followed the ambulance to the hospital, said her singing had a hypnotic effect. What if Talliwell's whole splinter NA group were anomaloids, gathered or converted?

In Miami, it had required Reyes, Todd, Brady, and Chaz to take down two unarmed girls. Until Miami, they'd believed the anomaly didn't play well with others. If that had changed, they might need a lot more firepower than they had in this car.

"They know," Hafidha said and for a moment Lau thought that Hafidha was answering her own thought. "I don't know what exactly they think they're making. More visionaries? More people for their chorus? But they know the anomaly needs the crack. The initial trauma."

"An organism displaying adaptive behavior doesn't necessarily understand the reason for the adaptation," Reyes said, folding his phone away. The Kevlar coordinated with his shirt, a dark steely blue that flattered his skin tone. "Was what James Caldwell was doing in Omaha so very different?"

Lau spotted their goal on the horizon well before they arrived there. Perched on the edge of rolling cornfields like a toy building on a model train board, the church itself was small and white and ringed on every side with white and blue Hancock County patrol cars.

Lau focused down, cleared her head, and thought about her breathing. The knot of anxiety in her gut would vanish as soon as they hit the doors at the church. Until then, she just had to stay on top of it it. Just like surfing--all that thunder down there had the power to pick you up and shake you like a rag doll, but if you could ride it, it could move you fast and far. "Do we think we have a whole church full of gammas?"

Reyes paused. "My current belief is that we have one gamma and a group of disciples. But that's based on--"

"--a lot of assumptions." said Hafidha as they pulled onto the gravel of the church overflow parking lot.

Reyes said *go* and the team hit the doors in unison, half a step behind him. Sheriff McKinley was already walking forward. Faintly, Lau could hear music.

"What have we got?" Reyes asked, as Falkner walked over to examine a building plan weighted to the hood of the nearest patrol vehicle.

"Five inside, we think. All in the nave. Talliwell's car is in the lot. We held back, as you requested."

"Continue to cover all exits," Reyes said. "Because we believe it may be possible to preserve some or all of Talliwell's disciples, my team will go in first. Stay on the headsets, though, and if we yell for backup come in fast. We're going to try to end this without bloodshed, but in general, the profile

for this type of offender does not suggest a good outcome with standard hostage negotiation techniques. Which is why we go in immediately."

It was always the same conversation. Lau didn't really need to listen, but it was professional to do so.

Reyes looked at Falkner. She was ready, and obviously wishing they had Chaz and Daphne. Lau wouldn't have minded Todd and Brady too. This one was going to be ugly.

"There are four ways in. We'll leave them the front doors; Hafidha, you remain with the Sheriff to advise him." The look that passed between Falkner and Hafs spoke volumes. *And keep any stray gammas from getting the drop on him*. "Lau, you cover the back kitchen door. Reyes and I will come in here and here. We'll try to catch Talliwell in a pincer. Mind your field of fire and target identification, everybody; there *will* be fellow officers in front of you."

Hafidha nodded. Lau nodded too, though she didn't like it. It felt like someone alien was doing the nodding for her. Was that what it was like when a puppetmaster grabbed your muscles and bones and moved them to suit himself?

Reyes made sure he caught McKinley's eyes. "This is a minimal losses situation, Sheriff. We are going to try to bring everybody out safely, but there are no guarantees, Our first priority right now is protecting civilian and law enforcement lives."

McKinley nodded grimly. *Simon Talliwell is expendable*.

Lau was flanked by deputies as she walked at a safe distance toward the back of the church. One of them seemed a little dubious that the bitty Asian woman knew how to handle that great big gun, but the other--bigger, blonder, wearing a pocket patch embroidered with the name *Fight* (No, *really?* In her head, Lau heard Chaz explaining that that it was an Anglicization of the German name *Veight*)--dropped a hand on his arm and he desisted.

"Break a leg," Deputy Fight said.

Lau smiled at him before she pulled her helmet and face shield on, because she didn't trust her voice.

Aware of and grateful for the covering guns behind her, she picked her way around the church, her machine pistol at low ready. Whatever Richard flew, this was better. And the FBI wasn't too scared of women to give them guns. She slunk up the steps and swung into the covered porch, the body of the MP5 snug between her two hands, pointing--

Directly at Simon Talliwell.

"Hello," he said.

The gun twitched in Lau's hand. He didn't seem at all worried by it.

Talliwell looked like his picture. Short, balding. Stout. And who ever heard of a stout gamma?

"Mr. Talliwell," Lau said. "I'm a Federal agent. We're here to bring you in for questioning--" She was on mic. The team knew where Talliwell was now.

"Do that, and my congregants will take their lives."

Voices, singing in the sanctuary behind him. Voices in uncanny unison. She couldn't tell how many. "No, Mr. Talliwell. You'll do it, not them."

"*Doctor* Talliwell," he snapped, his voice rising half an octave. "They put themselves in my hands. But murder is all you people see."

"And what Peter Kaczmareck did? Was that murder?"

Her earpiece hissed, and gave her Reyes's voice, thin and far away in the tiny speaker. "He's prepared to kill the hostages. Lau, keep him talking, keep him outside. If you can, get him to break his connection with his puppets."

She would ask Talliwell for his terms. She'd tell him they'd get him whatever he needed. Except, what if he already had that?

In the shelter of the half-enclosed porch, Talliwell was out of line-of-sight for anyone but her.

"You have never really suffered, have you? I can tell," said Talliwell.

"Everyone's suffered, Doctor Talliwell," Lau said. "You can't compare wounds."

Talliwell's cupid's-bow upper lip curled. "Spoken like someone with no real knowledge of what pain is. I bet both your parents are alive. I bet you have brothers and sisters that love you."

Brothers, Lau thought. "You don't need to harm anyone, Doctor Talliwell. We can--"

"Maybe you didn't get into the college you wanted. Or maybe a boy you liked didn't like you back. And sometimes bad things would happen to people close to you and you would wish they happened to you."

"That's not true," Lau said. Dana's abuse was monstrous. What she faced when she spoke up about it was almost as bad. Lau had been close enough to see what it did to her, and how could she romanticize that nightmare and want to claim it?

But did she ever wish she'd had some pain she couldn't cover up, and had her own Nikki Lau to step forward and help her bear it? Who had ever thought to try to rescue *her*?

Talliwell must have seen something in her expression, even through her faceplate; the lip-curl became an outright patronizing smile. "Oh, you felt guilty about it, but you wished it. A little trauma, a little drama would have made you so much more interesting. Even then you could see that the damaged had something you didn't."

"What did they have?" she asked.

"They could see. They are the poets and the addicts and the magical. They are God's Chosen."

Why didn't Talliwell just grab hold of her strings and pull them? What kept him from putting her gun barrel in her mouth?

Oh. He can't. *It only works on the damaged. On the* cracked.

How to tell the team? Had they figured it out already? "So you use them. The ones who are different. Because they were damaged."

He ignored that. "You're drawn to the suffering of others, like a parasite. That's why you only love broken people. But you will never really get what you want until you yourself are hurt."

"What is it you think I want?"

"To be *interesting*. To be *special*." He sneered as he spoke the last word. "To fill the void inside you that yearns for you-know-not-what. To hear the word spoken only for you. I could give you the key."

"No thanks," she said.

Talliwell smiled and shook his head, and his plump cheeks quivered with the motion. "Time for us to go inside. You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man in the back, would you?"

She didn't need Reyes's voice in her ear, saying, "Lau, don't do it," to know it was a bad idea. "Doctor Talliwell, stay where you are--"

"Come with me into the church," Talliwell said, his back still to her, "or no one inside leaves alive."

"Stall him." Reyes's words were small and desperate and too damned far away. Talliwell pushed open the back door to reveal a short, narrow hall, linoleum on the floor and scarred pale-green enamel on the walls. At the other end she saw the church's tiny, old-fashioned kitchen. The singing carried through the space, each note strong and sure and chillingly perfect.

She would shoot an unarmed gamma in the back. But if she couldn't stop him with the first bullet, he'd live long enough to take the hostages with him.

She followed Talliwell down the hall and through the kitchen that smelled faintly of decades of tuna casserole and seven-layer salad. She kept her gun aimed at his spine, and held far enough back that he couldn't turn and disarm her in a move. Given the circumstances, her precautions seemed like window dressing.

Under the sanctuary's high acoustic-tile ceiling, huddled before the scratched dark-stained pulpit in the overhead light of ranks of pendant lamps, six of the stacking chairs that served as Sunday seating were drawn up in a circle. Six men and women, thin as junkies, thin as gammas, sat in them, holding hands, their eyes on each other. Singing.

Chaz, from his brief report on their interview with Cramer, thought the song might be hypnotic, might suck the listener into Talliwell's field of control. Lau couldn't imagine how. It was perfect, glassy cold flawless *perfect*, an alien reconstruction of what human choirs had sounded like made a thousand years after the humans were gone. It was like listening to razor blades and needles singing. It made her shake and want to run. She concentrated on her grip on the MP5, stock hard against her shoulder, the web of her right thumb splayed above the grip and her left hand pulling back against the barrel. Her palms were slick on the steel.

"We surrender," said Talliwell. He swept his arms out to either side, just slow enough that she didn't spook and shoot him. The gesture took in the singers, the room, the town. "We surrender ourselves to God. God will correct our defects. God will give us guidance. God has told us to surrender ourselves to you."

He'd walked her all the way in here, alone, in order to surrender? When he could have done it at the back door? Why?

"Did he, now?"

Lau flinched, and the gun jerked against her shoulder. It was Hafidha's voice, and not through Lau's earpiece. Hafidha, sidling through the double doors at the other end of the little sanctuary, her Glock at low ready, beads shining on her swinging braids. She'd dumped her helmet somewhere.

Talliwell jerked, too, glared over his shoulder, but the singers never faltered.

Hafidha nodded at him as if she were recognizing a friend. "You finally figured out you had to start small. So first you drill a nice little trauma-hole in your toys, here, so you can string them around your neck. Visits with their dead loved ones worked pretty well, huh?" She sounded downright cheerful, but her eyes were narrow, and never left Talliwell.

"Hafs," Lau said carefully, warningly.

"Gates, stand down." Reyes, crisp and certain in Lau's ear.

Hafidha showed no sign of hearing him. She moved down the strip of worn red carpet along the aisle slow and steady, like a stalking cat. "Then you spread the agony around. How many families in town had kids in that Sunday school class?"

Talliwell smiled at Hafidha, a real smile, not the scorn he'd heaped on Lau. "Now you are someone who has clearly known torment. Your eyes are open. Don't worry, our messengers have already gone out. They are practicing and carrying the message. The kingdom of the damaged is coming."

"Now you're done with your little pissant town. You're ready to branch out. To *franchise*."

Reyes and Falkner shouldered through the double doors at the front of the sanctuary and split to either side, weapons drawn. "Simon Talliwell!"

Falkner shouted, her voice ringing big and clear over the singing. *Oh, thank God,* Lau thought. "Federal agents! You're under arrest!"

"Except you're not going to surrender," Hafidha said, and raised her pistol.

Lau saw the moment before it happened. Half a moment. Half an instant. Not enough time even to draw breath, let alone cry out.

After that, she couldn't have been heard over the gunfire.

Simon Talliwell jerked with each report. Each bullet to the center of mass, to Talliwell's chest and stomach, and he twitched and twitched and seemed to flinch even after he'd fallen, blood spreading outward, soaking in and lost in the stained, shabby red carpet. At the corner of Lau's vision Falkner lunged, and Hafidha grunted. The Glock hit the carpet with a dull thump, muffled and anticlimactic.

Lau closed on Talliwell, front sight a ring on his torso, and was aware of Reyes, on her right, doing the same. She kept Talliwell covered while Reyes felt for his pulse. It wasn't until Reyes rose and stepped back that Lau could see what lay before her as a corpse and not a gamma. Arms and legs askew, head thrown back and eyes and mouth wide, slack-muscled like an emptied bag, Talliwell looked as if he'd been dropped from a great height by a careless hand.

She heard Reyes's harsh panting, even over her own laboring breath and the pounding of blood in her ears, and the small, short sounds of Hafidha trying not to moan. That was when she realized the singing had stopped.

*

Lau hung up the phone on her borrowed copshop desk and stretched, toes pointed, arms overhead. The motion rolled the chair backward a little, and took a kink or two out of her shoulders. It didn't do anything for the knot of sick in her stomach.

She hadn't realized Sheriff McKinley was in the room until he cleared his throat and said, "How's it going?"

She spun the chair so she could look him in the eye. It was respectful. He deserved that. "Sandy Cramer died. They couldn't stop the bleeding in time." She'd have to tell Chaz and Worth, and wasn't looking forward to it. What she'd also tell them, and wouldn't mention to McKinley, was that Cramer had

held onto life against any reasonable odds--until 8:27 p.m., when she'd shut down and died like a normal person.

No one had been present to pronounce on Talliwell's time of death, but Lau would have bet her teeth it was the same.

McKinley didn't close his eyes, but his gaze dropped, and she saw his lips move. The job hardened people, but there was a difference between hard and petrified. "What happens now?"

"We help with whatever cleanup you feel we can be useful for. If you need anyone to talk to the survivors or the victims' families, or if any of your officers have questions about what happened, we can assist. We'll clear the reports with the State's Attorney General. And if you have any subsequent problems, we're always available to consult." Lau knew she sounded professional, assured, assuring--that was what boilerplate was for. But she wished she could say, *No one knows. You go from day to week to year never seeing the thing around the corner, just like the rest of us. That much, we're all in together.*

McKinley reached out a big, square hand to the back of another chair and swung it around and across the aisle between desks, as if twirling a dance partner. Was he a good dancer? Maybe. Probably. He sat down and leaned his elbows on his knees. "Is there someone to help you folks?"

Lau kept her startle reaction down to a blink. After a breath, she said, "We're used to these cases. We'll be fine."

McKinley didn't bother to hide how little he believed that. "Special Agent Gates maybe saved those six people's lives. Now they can go back to trying to find something to keep 'em from drinking or buying rock or cooking meth."

She bit her lip. "Thanks for the pep talk. They're not dead, and they're not under someone else's control."

"They're addicts, Agent Lau. They gave control of their lives over to whatever they're hooked on, because life was too damned hard. AA says, 'You can't handle it? Fine. Don't give it over to the booze. Give it to the group. Give it to Jesus. Give it to the Man in the Moon. Because we get that you're going to give it away to *something*.'" McKinley's words were harsh, but his hands were soft and open, hanging at the ends of his arms. His brow

furrowed like a bloodhound's, worried and caring. "Some of those six people will wish you'd just let 'em die and saved everyone the trouble."

Lau met his eyes. "No one's as hard on drunks as an ex-drunk."

"There's no such thing as an ex-drunk, Special Agent." He held her gaze, unashamed.

Maybe the reason why she wasn't attracted to men like this one was because she knew she'd never live up to those standards.

McKinley rose, wiping his palms on his trouser legs. "Hard to just walk away from something like that. Look after Special Agent Gates."

"We will. And thank you, Sheriff McKinley."

He laughed a little, down in his throat. "Do they teach manners at the FBI academy, too? Damn, I should send my officers."

*

This time it was Lau knocking on Hafidha's hotel room door. 103. *It ought to mean something in leetspeak. Or maybe an emoticon*. At last she heard Hafidha call, "It's not locked!"

Lau opened the door and stuck her head in. "Well, it should be. You know the stats on this stuff. Everyone else is loading the cars. Are you ready?"

Hafidha knelt in the middle of the room she'd shared with Falkner, rummaging in her black patent vinyl go bag. Hafs appeared to have nested like a hamster; one bed was stripped of all but the bottom sheet, the pillows flung at random at the foot, and the blanket and bedspread pooled and heaped on the floor as if they'd been kicked aside. The other bed was made tight and smooth. Falkner's military soul must have been sorely tried.

"Almost," Hafidha answered, a bit muffled by the cascade of her braids. She straightened up and winced, and flexed her right hand. "This would have gone a lot faster if Mom hadn't half broken my wrist. Whatever happened to 'Hold your fire'?"

Lau tried desperately to come up with an answer for that, one that wouldn't sound like an accusation. She seemed to be out of think-on-her-feet. "Where's your laptop bag?" she asked instead.

"Oh, god. Under that towel, I think--yes? Yes. Shit, I am not going without that earring..."

"Bathroom counter?" Lau suggested. In spite of the sore wrist, Hafidha's movements were precise and powerful, big gestures cramped into too-small spaces. Lau wanted to help with *something*, though she was a little afraid to step further into the room and risk squashing unseen objects under the bedclothes.

Besides, if this was the aftermath of, say, a one-on-one with Falkner, there wasn't much she could do.

"Hah! There it is." Hafidha hung the second of a pair of coral chandelier drops in her left ear and zipped the go bag like Siegfried and Roy disappearing a tiger. "Snag my jacket out of the closet, will you?"

The pressure of not saying it, of riding the current of words Hafidha was using to keep her from saying it, finally broke Lau's reserve. "Hafs, are you okay?"

Hafidha stood up. "You know, I'm getting pretty tired of that question," she said as she dusted off the knees of her wide-legged trousers.

"Who's asked it so far?"

She hoisted the bag easily to her shoulder and let it thump her hip. Then she met Lau's look with a wide-eyed one of her own. "Who do you think? Chaz, Daphs. Es. Reyes would have, if he didn't think he already knew the answer."

"Okay, ow."

Hafidha cocked her head, stared, sighed. She shoved a corner of the blanket aside with the sharp toe of her boot so she could get to the bed and sit down. "Look. I took out the bad guy and saved everybody else. Just like in Kansas and Missouri, and damn, what is it about me and the Midwest? The only difference is, this time my coworkers are tippy-toeing around me like I'm the star in a deathbed scene."

"He surrendered."

"Oh, bullshit." Hafidha waved the word away, a knife-edged sweep of silver rings and carnelian polish. "He dragged the bait behind him so he could get

as big an audience as possible for his next piece of Agony Theater. *You know that.* Just because you didn't have the stones to cap the bastard, honeycakes, doesn't mean it was wrong for me to do it."

All the easy words were frozen in Lau's throat. Later Hafs would remember this, and apologize. Lau would forgive her. Whatever the ruling on the shooting of Simon Talliwell, that shot at Lau was an accident, and only wounded. "It's not up to me to decide, anyway."

"Yeah." Hafidha's face softened a little, and she studied her fingers, rubbing at some invisible smudge on her thumbnail. "You guys will have to do your own webcrawling for a bit." She lifted her chin and squeezed out a smile. "I wouldn't mind the week of administrative leave so much if it came with pay."

"Hafs. This one... This might not be a week."

Hafidha looked up, mild surprise in her eyebrows and mouth.

"Chaz said Cramer's singing felt like, like a compulsion, but no one else experienced that. Talliwell's puppeteering may have only worked on--on people who had some anomalous..." God *damn*, how to talk about this without sounding like Hafidha and Chaz were a laboratory experiment? "It'll be in my report, that Talliwell may have affected your judgment without your knowing. They'll take that into account when--"

Lau stopped at the sight of Hafidha's twisted lip and disgusted glare. "You're going to offer my excuses? Maybe apologize for me, and promise I'll never do it again? Talliwell was a *mass murderer.*"

Yeah, he was. Hafidha had been in that Sunday school classroom; Lau hadn't. It wasn't up to her to decide. "I'm sorry, Hafs. I didn't mean to be all..."

"Patronizing?"

Lau shrugged. "Not exactly what I was thinking? But if I sounded like that much of an asshole, I'm extra-sorry. I trust your judgment." Under normal circumstances, anyway, which would be reinstalled soon.

Hafidha's jaw worked. Then she sighed, briskly and audibly, and made a disgusted moue. "Or you could tell 'em I was on the rag..."

It wasn't funny so much as it was a relief, and if Lau had been drinking anything, it would have come out her nose. "Come on, hon. Let's get out to the cars before they send SWAT in."

Lau swung Hafidha's laptop bag onto her own shoulder as an apologetic gesture, and Hafs let her, possibly likewise. They left the room, and Lau led them twining through the loudly-carpeted halls. When the lobby opened in front of her, Lau felt a surge of relief. They didn't need to get lost in the hotel corridors, given that it might be hard to laugh together about it.

Falkner had the Subaru parked under the portico with the trunk open. Chaz idled by the far wheel well, hands thrust in his jacket pockets and shoulders hunched and awkward. Trying, Lau thought, not to worry about Hafidha.

"I was wondering if you'd decided to walk home," Falkner said.

"Only if Chaz won't make coffee on the plane."

His lips stretched in his funny flat grin.

"Here." Lau handed Falkner the laptop bag. "Oh, except--do you want it with you?" She turned as she said it.

Hafidha wasn't behind her.

"Shit," Lau blurted.

The smile in the corner of Falkner's mouth disappeared. "Wrong turn?"

"I'll go see." Lau was breathless with fear; she could barely hear her own voice.

The automatic door to the lobby was still open. She strode through, almost as fast as running. Behind her she felt Falkner and Chaz follow.

Because she was going too fast, she rounded the first corner and tripped over the black patent vinyl bag. The garish carpet burned her palms. The flooring underneath bruised her knee. There was no one else in the hall. "Shit, shit, *shit*--"

Falkner stood over her, eyes narrowed and searching for movement, while Chaz crouched and unzipped the bag. Lau recognized the red sweater on top.

The wadded-up towels and the phone book under it were new, though.

Chaz's hands hovered over the bag, his fingers shaking, as if he were trying to conjure the contents to be something else. His face was bloodless under his tan.

"Come on, come *on*," Lau growled as she scrambled off the floor and lunged for room 103. She remembered, as she bounced off the wall at the next turning, that one of the people she'd just ordered around was her boss.

The door of the room had swung closed behind them when they left. Deadbolt, metal frame--*could* she kick it in?

Falkner laid a hand on her shoulder and nudged her aside. She slid a keycard in the lock, and the green LED glowed. "I forgot to turn it in," Falkner said, and opened the door.

The chaos in the room was just the same. Hafidha wasn't there. Oh, god, Lau wanted to shout "Clear." Everything about this was wrong.

Falkner picked her way to the bathroom, turned on the light, looked back at them and shook her head.

Lau was panting, her shirt sticking in the sweat between her shoulder blades. Her palms and knee hurt like blazes and her legs were quivering under her. "Her stuff," she said, and hated the way her voice wobbled. "Where did she..."

Chaz briskly stacked the pillows on the bed, shook out the top sheet, wadded it, and dropped it beside them. Then he did the same with the blanket and bedspread. He hadn't said anything. He turned to the smooth, tightly-made bed, and Lau met Falkner's eyes. Falkner shrugged with her eyebrows.

Chaz yanked the covers of the second bed down. The violence of the motion made Lau jump.

There were two pillows on the bed, but only one had a case. "A classic," he said. His voice sounded painfully tight.

Falkner strode to the window and slammed it open. "The security lock is pried off."

Chaz moved faster than Lau had known he could, and she knew he was quick. Falkner put out a hand, but he was faster than her as well. He seemed to accordion-fold, one palm on the window frame; then he was through the

opening and on the ground, and running toward the only cover in sight: a row of low evergreens at the edge of the parking lot, and a tall wooden fence around someone's back yard.

"Chaz, no!" Falkner shouted. She added, weakly, "It's private property!"

"Hot pursuit." Lau was surprised at her own voice, flat and croaking.

Falkner turned her face from the window. A tear runneled one cheek, then the other, like some ridiculous, unconscious leak. "Pursuit of what?"

*

They retrieved Chaz half an hour later, sitting hunched on a curb, knees and elbows jutting in four different directions, head hanging, face curtained by his sweat-soaked hair. Falkner climbed out of the car and squatted beside him.

"Chaz," she said, and waited.

His ribcage swelled and shrank three times. Then he lifted his head and pushed his hair back with both hands. Yes, he was present, he was focusing on her, he was *there*. But Falkner looked at his hollow cheeks and wide, wide eyes and thought of photos of refugees, of camp survivors, of disaster victims. And remembered, *No one has ever been there for him always.*

The pain in her throat nearly choked her. But he needed--*she* needed--Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner now. "Chaz. Can you stand up?"

He nodded. She put a hand under his elbow, and he let her help. When they walked to the car, he limped a little on his left foot.

Reyes and Lau were at the hotel making phone calls, talking to the highway patrol, trying to find a way to explain why they were to watch for the FBI agent who had stopped Simon Talliwell, who hadn't committed a crime, who was suspected of absolutely nothing except failing to do what she'd always done before. So it was Daphne in the driver's seat. She twisted around when Falkner opened the back door for Chaz, and reached through the space between the front seats. Then she stopped, arm stretched, hand suspended in the middle of nothing.

Chaz stared as if trying to figure out what it was. Then he lifted his arm and brushed her fingers with his.

There would be plenty of talking later. Now, none of them knew what to say. After two blocks, Daphne cleared her throat. "She left her laptop." Reyes had looked in the messenger bag and found it, at least, held its expected contents.

Another block, and Chaz murmured, "She doesn't need it."

They passed a church--not First Methodist, not All Saints Episcopal, not any they'd associated with Simon Talliwell or his victims. A Baptist church, made of red brick and white trim and big glossy-painted front doors. The choir would assemble on Sunday morning. And when they stood to sing, and the congregation stood to join them, would their voices falter and fade?

We gather in Your name, she thought bitterly. *We gather as one people, one spirit.*

Holy, holy, holy.

Softer

Washington, D.C., April 2009

Nicolette Lau should have, by rights, never run into the girl.

Even before she'd started training to pass the PFT and the twenty weeks at Quantico that came after, she'd been proud of what her body could do. Not the way her sister-in-law was proud, but of its reflexes, its awareness, the way it could put off *calm* or *angry* or *trustworthy* or notice if someone was walking just far enough behind her at two in the morning. All those things were assets at My Sister's Place, where trained volunteers were always a little bit overworked and most of the residents had read tea leaves in the hitch of a husband's, a boyfriend's, a parent's shoulders every night for years, trying to anticipate the punches. Nikki Lau paid extra attention on her Thursday nights at the shelter. She made sure the weather around her body was kind, that she wasn't pushing into anyone's personal no-man's-land.

She should have *never* run into the girl.

But for once, she wasn't looking where she was going. Part five of the open-ended serial of Martha Kaplansky's brother's Big Gay Wedding was screening right behind her left shoulder, narration and pantomime both, and there was a blind turn at the corner of the stairs: the kind that made you wish that women's shelters had the kind of money to design their own spaces and not just take whatever urban castoff was in a good enough neighbourhood. She was watching Martha's puffy, white hands when she came around the corner--

--and ran straight into somebody small enough, thin enough that even Nikki Lau could knock her over.

She wasn't thin enough that Nikki Lau could knock her over and still keep on her feet. She went down hard too, butt bouncing on the white lino-and-rubber stairs. The reflexes kicked in quick enough to tuck her chin, loosen her limbs, keep her neck and spine from dancing with the staircase while her calves fought to get her back on her feet.

"Shit!" she heard Martha say, instinctively hurl herself back. A lot of the volunteers at My Sister's Place were also survivors. There was an ingrained

reaction to violence. "You okay?" was the second reaction, and it was probably to both of them, her and whoever she'd just gone head-on into.

Was she okay? Butt sore, legs sore. Blinking with adrenaline. Her hand at the small of her back, under the jacket. Where the backup gun was.

God. Her fight-or-flight was firing. Lau stuffed it down, deliberately breathed deep and even. The common room was quiet, too quiet; everyone was watching. She needed to cut that shit out before it scared the residents.

The girl she'd run into was on her ass too, right at the bottom of the stairs: a woman in her late teens or very early twenties, copper-dark skin, dark hair skinned back in a ratty ponytail over a big, floppy Georgetown tee-shirt that had seen better days. Her dark eyes were wide, the pupils too big. Desperately afraid. Oh, hell.

She should *never* have run into that girl--

"Shit, I'm sorry," she said, rising not to her feet but into a crouch, so she didn't tower over the girl and make it worse. Lau held out a hand to help her up, rubbed her own thigh with the other. *You and me. We're in this together. Nothing to be afraid of here.* "You okay? I should've been paying more attention."

The girl shied away from her hand, seemingly as autopilot as Lau's going for the gun that wasn't there, before shaking her head. She got one clear look at the way the tendons moved, the bones standing out stark against her skin in a way Lau recognized all too well--

And then the woman blurred, as if she'd pulled a curtain; a soft voice murmured, "I'm fine, I'm fine, no harm, no foul," nervous and soothing.

And then she wasn't there.

Lau blinked. *The other day upon the stair / I met a man who wasn't there / He wasn't there again today / I wish that man would go away* jangled through her head, and then, more clearly: *Oh, shit.*

"Who was that?" Lau asked, standing now, dusting herself off. No gamma to the right; no gamma to the left. No, she didn't know the girl was a gamma. Not with that soft voice, the way she'd elided herself neatly from the landscape. No *beta* to the left. Oh man, oh man.

"Who was who?" said Martha. "Woman, you need to be more careful. They'll say I pushed," and grinned.

Oh man.

"One sec," Lau said, remembering those big, dark eyes. Feeling the memory blur in the back of her head. She dusted her palms on the legs of her jeans and booted it to the front desk.

Grace was on duty behind the high counter: the front desk had been a snack bar in the small community centre before all the kids had moved out of this neighbourhood and the city had sold it to My Sister's Place for the equivalent of a cursory dollar fee. She looked up, creased concern on her forehead under the carefully-straightened hair. Grace was a nice lady; she wasn't loud about her vanities. "Hey, you all right there?"

"Hey," Lau said, quick terse smile. "I'm fine. Do we have someone new in today? Small, late teens, black girl? I think I knocked her over just now." This was normal. Any iffy contact with residents was to be reported. Everything had to stay on the up-and-up here.

Grace opened her book, scanned down the names. "Not that I know," she said. There was a look in her eyes, faraway. Blank and puzzled.

Lau swallowed. Now she couldn't remember the hair, whether it was long or short. The logo on that big tee-shirt that maybe wasn't so big, just that the ribs and belly and chest underneath them were way too small...

Act fast, she told herself. Pulled out a crisp, official business card and snapped it onto the counter.

"Just if you see her again?" Lau asked, suddenly bitter certain that Grace wouldn't see her again, even if her eyes did. "Let her know I have some friends who are like her. I can maybe help her. With everything."

"Right," Grace said, clearly not sure what the hell had blown in on her quiet weeknight shift. Lau nodded, exhaling, and took herself back into the common room. Her leg *was* sore. Bleh.

When she looked back, Grace was noodling at the ancient computer on her desk, calm and smoothed of all worry. The card wasn't there.

Nikki Lau grinned; one second of relief, of hopeful victory before she forgot why she was smiling, why she'd come over there at all.

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